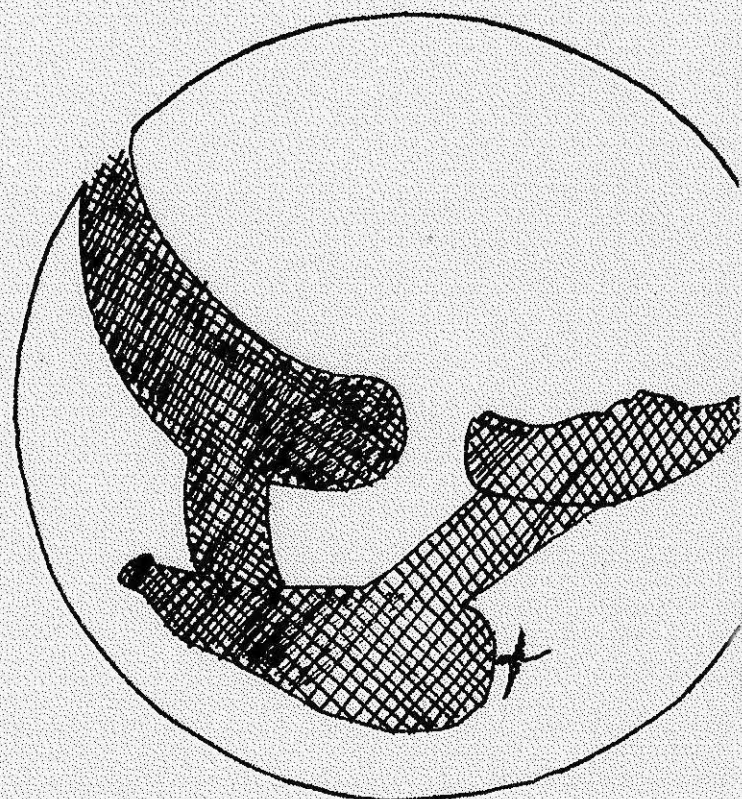


VARIATIONS

ON A THEME 3



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VARIATIONS ON A THEME 3

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INTRODUCTION

In *Kraith Collected* we met an alternate universe Spock whose Kirk had died. We felt sympathy for him and set out to explore how he could pursue his search for a substitute Kirk.

Commodore Spock, in the course of his search, encountered many universes before he found one where his counterpart, Captain Spock of the *Enterprise*, was a sadist who delighted in torturing and humiliating his young and vulnerable First Officer, Commander James Kirk.

In pity and outrage the Commodore crossed into the alternate universe to help Kirk escape - but found himself unable to leave when Kirk killed the Captain to save the Commodore's life.

Kirk refused to ensure his own safety by abandoning the *Enterprise* in Klingon space, accepting that he would face trial if his 'crime' was discovered. The Commodore took the Captain's place, and joined with McCoy in the difficult task of restoring Kirk's shattered confidence.

In *Variations 2*, the crew of the *Enterprise* had accepted the Commodore without suspicion - then Spock was called home to face his 'father' on a Vulcan where reason and logic did not hold total sway - and where the punishment for murder was cruel and barbaric.

Sarok's reaction, when he eventually discovered that his son was dead, was unexpected, and freed Kirk and Spock to return to the *Enterprise* - where Kirk's long-lost brother had been posted to the Security section.

Years earlier Sam Kirk had deserted his young brother; on *Deneva*, we learned how each had developed during the years apart.

The end of *Variations 2* saw Kirk as the capable, confident First Officer of the *Enterprise*, serving his Captain with whole-hearted loyalty, but still haunted by a deep personal insecurity.

Now, in *Variations 3*, we explore the problems that will arise when Spock is ordered to return to Vulcan to fulfil his duty to planet and family by taking a wife; and when Gary Mitchell, Kirk's one friend from Starfleet Academy, joins the ship.

We are grateful for your response to, and your interest in, *Variations* on a Theme; to those of you who have made comments and suggestions, we would like to say,

"The story is by no means finished yet!"

Several people have commented that by making Spock impotent we took an easy way out of the sex theme that appeared to have been introduced. This was not our intention nor was it entirely our idea; the original Commodore Spock of Spock's Pilgrimage (*Kraith Collected 4*) was stated to be 'immune to pon farr'. If one assumes that Vulcans are only sexually capable during pon farr - and if they are capable at other times then logically the madness of pon farr is not really necessary - then a Vulcan who is immune must be impotent. The other possibility, of course, was that Spock's sexual development was wholly Human but that he had not realised it; by believing himself to be incapable - which as a Vulcan he appeared to be - he in fact made himself incapable. Either way, we realised that for our purpose to be absolutely clear it was best for both men to be sexually incapable - whether physically or psychologically did not matter. We did not set out to write a K/Sex story; we set out to write a story in which the two main characters love each other deeply and with total commitment, but without feeling any need for physical expression of that love.

For some months I've been telling people that I was waiting for artwork for the zine, and that I had a really good artist lined up for it. So now you'll be asking yourselves - "Where's the artwork?"

We had originally hoped that Gerry Downes would be able to illustrate it, but when she told us she couldn't fit it in - she was pushed to her limit getting out Stardate Unknown 5 and Alternative 2 - we found an artist in Britain.

I gave this artist a mid-May deadline, with a mental extension of at least a month, and in fact the artwork arrived during the second week in June. And it was no use for our purpose. There was no time to get more artwork done if we were to meet the August publication date, and that, we were determined to do.

What was wrong with the artwork? The artist - who is new into fandom - decided to experiment with illustrating the mood of the story rather than scenes from it. Well, O.K., fine - except that his pictures were so interpretative that they would each have needed a footnote to explain what they meant. I was really bitterly disappointed, because he is such a good artist and I understood that he was trying to produce something unusual for the zine, something outstanding. As a technical exercise in interpreting mood, the pictures he did would undoubtedly have been marked very high by any expert; but that sort of picture is of very little interest in a zine. Not even the very artistically minded of the U.S. zine editors - like Connie Faddis in Interphase - used that kind of verging-on-the-abstract illustration. Perhaps it was my own fault for not making it clearer to him that what I wanted was straight illustrations with any 'mood' work kept to a minimum - only he had never in fact done anything like that before!

So - like #1 where the assigned artist let us down when she changed jobs - this issue is unillustrated.

We do feel that the story is the important thing in a zine, and that good artwork merely complements the words; it's just a pity that having delayed the zine to get what I expected to be good artwork, it's now going to be going out as it would have done back in February when Gerry first told us she couldn't manage, had I decided to go ahead and print it then, regardless.

We've made a start to Variations 4 - when Spock goes missing, Kirk is the only person who can go and look for him. When will it be printed? Some time in 1980. Will it be illustrated? The way I'm feeling at the moment, no, it won't; at the moment I don't feel like trying ever again to get specific artwork for a specific story; and if that sounds defeatist...at the moment, I'm feeling very defeated.

There is one bright spot in life, however; this zine contains three poems that have been sent to us by readers as creative responses. They are printed in the order in which we received them; it's sheer chance that they are also in sequence according to events in Variations 1 & 2.

The poem by Kathy Sims was first printed in STAG newsletter No. 31.

Shirley

Valerie

In broken mountains where the bleeding sun
 drips fire upon the ash of Vulcan's Forge
 I walked the burning, rocky paths that run
 like blistered slashes from mountain to gorge,
 And learned the nature of the world was cruel.

Yet rather would I face the wilderness
 than linger in the silence of my home
 where, in my soul a gulf of emptiness
 grew deeper, colder while I was alone,
 but burst in rage if anyone drew near.

My half-breed blood had marked me like a curse -
 Vulcan and Human flung contempt at me.
 Revenge rasped harsh inside me like a thirst
 And finally my bitterness broke free -
 But clouds of doubt have closed upon my mind.

James -
 Star King,
 child,
 idol,
 slave...

Flow your tears to bathe away my guilt;
 your silent song of sorrow crushes me.
 Break through the iron hardness I have built
 for in your freedom so shall I be free.

Kathy Sims.

Lost was I, body and soul held by another,
 Then HE came and freed me
 From these chains of fear and pain.

Loved was I, shackled by force of mind,
 And agony of flesh
 But such a love destroys.

Now I am found, free to live once again,
 And HE who stands before me now,
 Is my brother, beyond all ties of blood,
 We are pledged, with the bonds of love.

Gene S. Delapenia.

DAWN JOURNEY

The sun now rising in Deneva's sky
 Begins to chase the shadows of the night
 But my eyes are watchful of the forest's shade,
 For dangers lurk here in the morning light.

How very light and still the burden which
 I carry in my arms. Your sleeping form
 Seems almost lost within the desert cloak
 Wrapped tight around to keep you safe from harm.

The forest's shadows creep inside my mind
 Reminders of the pain that I once knew...
 The way things were a universe ago
 Before my lonely search brought me to you.

What did I think to find, when I came here?
 A substitute for him, a counterpart?
 You are not he -- yet with breath-taking speed
 You've carved a special place within my heart.

We both had lost, were searching and in need,
 And both had felt the pain of being alone.
 Yet out of loss and suffering came gain.
 We've created something special of our own.

My pleasure as you slowly learned to trust...
 I could not quite control the surge of pride
 As I watched you gain the courage and the strength
 I knew so well when at my Captain's side.

You follow me as once I followed him,
 You're growing...but you still need to depend.
 Yet I need you as much as you need me --
 Am I really the 'stronger' one, my friend?

To lose you now; to try to search again --
 I would not even have the strength to start.
 I hurry through the forest, for you must live.
 I cannot lose you, brother of my heart!

Susan Meek.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME 3PART 1: KAREN

Leonard McCoy, Chief Surgeon of the U.S.S. Enterprise, sighed with barely-concealed irritation as he eased the collar of his dress uniform; catching his Captain's eye he grinned self-consciously, earning a sympathetic lift of one slanting eyebrow.

"Any word about our next mission?" he asked.

"Not as yet. However, I have been summoned to an appointment with Starbase Commander Devlin in the morning, and I understand that President Gallard is also to be present. No doubt I will receive our new orders then."

The Enterprise had been recalled to Starbase 9 to be briefed for a delicate diplomatic mission; the base had been recently established on Farol, and Starfleet personnel enjoyed a friendly relationship with the inhabitants. The Enterprise's arrival had coincided with the President's annual ball, and the senior officers had been invited as a matter of courtesy - a courtesy which in McCoy's opinion he at least could have dispensed with, involving as it did the wearing of the hated dress uniform. He had concealed his irritation with his usual charm, however, and for some hours had been performing his social duties to perfection; then, feeling the need for a break from the endless polite small-talk, he had seized eagerly on the opportunity to approach Spock, who was for the moment on his own.

The two men were standing in a recess by the dance floor, watching the dancers with idle interest; seeing them deep in conversation no-one disturbed them. Taking advantage of their momentary privacy, McCoy leaned forward and lowered his voice.

"Spock, I must talk to you soon - I'm becoming very disturbed about Jim."

"Oh?"

Automatically, the Vulcan's eyes raked the dance floor, searching out his First Officer; he gave an almost inaudible sigh of relief as he caught sight of the fair head across the room.

Kirk was dancing with the President's daughter, an exquisitely lovely girl in her late teens. They made an attractive couple, the Vulcan thought absently, equally matched in height, both fair, both undeniably good-looking, with a refined grace and elegance that made them stand out even in this distinguished company. That others thought so too was made obvious by the indulgent glances cast at them by the other dancers - even the President was beaming proudly - and Spock relaxed gradually.

"He seems happy enough," the Vulcan murmured, the anxiety invoked by McCoy's words relieved by the sight of Kirk's smiling face as he spoke to the girl.

"Is he?" McCoy countered seriously. "Just watch him."

As he spoke the music stopped, and the dancers began to leave the floor. The girl slipped her arm through Kirk's and spoke laughingly to him; Kirk replied but Spock was aware of a sudden tension in his body. The Human glanced around as though seeking something, and across the room his eyes met Spock's; at once he smiled, and began to lead his partner towards his friends.

"Here he comes, just as I expected," McCoy muttered, "and I can make a pretty good guess as to what he wants." He broke off quickly as the couple reached them, and although he greeted the girl with all his famed charm the Vulcan was aware that all his attention was on Kirk.

"You summoned me, Captain?" The clear voice held only polite enquiry, but unseen by the girl the hazel eyes begged for help.

Spock thought quickly, searching for some reason for calling his First Officer, something that Kirk could adapt to his needs. "I regret spoiling your enjoyment, Mr. Kirk," he said after the briefest of pauses, "but it occurs to me - the systems check on the standby navigational equipment has not been completed; Mr. Chekov has encountered a problem, and I require the report first thing in the morning."

Kirk's expressive eyes thanked him silently. "I'll deal with it at once, sir. However, it will mean that I must return to the ship. Will you excuse me, Miss Gallard?"

"I suppose you must go," the girl said regretfully. "A pity - I was enjoying our conversation."

"And I," Kirk agreed. "However, perhaps Dr. McCoy...?"

"I'd be delighted." McCoy stepped forward as the music began. "Miss Gallard, will you do me the honour?"

The girl smiled and accepted his arm, casting a regretful glance at Kirk as the doctor led her onto the floor. Kirk gave a sigh of relief and turned to his Captain. "Thanks."

Spock touched his arm. "You can beam up from the garden," he said. "Come - I'll walk with you."

As they emerged onto the deserted terrace he caught the Human's shoulder, halting him. "What's wrong, Jim?" he asked quietly.

The Human coloured, and smiled apologetically. "I feel such an idiot. We were talking, Karen and I, and found we had a lot of interests in common. I was beginning to like her...then, when the dance ended, she suggested that we go into the garden. I could tell that she was...interested in me, and I knew she'd expect... I just froze. I couldn't think of a way to refuse without hurting her feelings... Then I saw you, and I knew you'd help me."

"I see. You did not wish to accompany her, then."

"No! I got so scared... Why can't people leave me alone!" Kirk bit back his explosive outburst and continued more quietly. "I'll go back to the ship now if you don't mind, Spock. Thanks for not giving me away. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Jim."

Thoughtfully the Vulcan watched until the Human was beamed up to the ship.

Some time later, McCoy, coming in search of his Captain, found Spock still sitting in the shadows of the terrace, deep in thought. He looked up at the doctor's approach.

"Miss Gallard?" he asked.

McCoy sank gratefully into a chair. "I left her with some of the younger officers - I'm getting too old for this game."

"Yet you are younger than..."

"Than my counterpart in your own universe? So is Jim, isn't he? And the Captain would have been younger than you as well."

"I am considerably older than he," Spock agreed. "Fortunately, it is difficult to judge age in a Vulcan."

"Where's Jim now?" McCoy changed the subject to the one that had been troubling him. "Gone back to the Enterprise?"

"Yes. McCoy, you said you were concerned about him?"

"I am, and that's a sample of what I mean! I've heard some of my nurses

discussing him, and tonight he bore out what they were saying. A young, healthy, attractive man with a beautiful girl in his arms - and he runs to you like a scared rabbit! There's already been talk, and there's going to be more if he doesn't start acting normally around women."

"His fear of sex... " Spock murmured.

"Exactly. He should be getting over that by now. Sure, he had a bad time ...but he's safe now, and he knows it. To be honest, Spock, at first I thought that after all he is, despite everything, attracted to men, but now I'm sure that's not so - he's even more scared of men than he is of women. He won't open up to me - subconsciously he sees even me as a possible threat - but he will talk to you. Try and reassure him - I don't want to see him hurt again."

"I will try," Spock said slowly, "but he is equally reticent on that subject with me, and I will not distress him by raising it. Should he mention it himself, I will do what I can." For a moment a frown of irritation crept over his face. "As Jim said to me only a short time ago, why can he not be left alone? Humans have an unhealthy interest in the sexual lives of their companions, Doctor."

"Perhaps so; but the sexual drive is - or should be - strong in Humans. It's bound to cause talk when someone as attractive as Jim remains unattached. Most of the women see him as a challenge - and Spock, if he keeps on ignoring the girls, some of the men might too...and he's just not capable of dealing with that!"

Spock sighed again. "I will do what I can," he repeated. "Now, shall we return to the ballroom? We do have duties."

McCoy rose, and adjusted his collar for the thousandth time; the caustic comment directed at the designer of the dress tunic fell on deaf, if elegant, ears.

* * * * *

In the morning Spock beamed down for his orders. Contrary to the Vulcan's expectations, Commander Devlin was alone; he looked up, smiling, as the Captain entered.

"Good morning, Spock," he greeted him cheerfully. Something in his expression warned Spock to go carefully - this man clearly regarded Spock as more than just 'one of his men'. Perhaps it was fortunate that Devlin had left the ball relatively early.

"Good morning," he replied noncommittally.

"Come for your orders?" Devlin chuckled. "I think your First Officer will find this mission to his liking."

Spock half smiled. "A scientific mission? We understood it was to be political."

Devlin's chuckle intensified. "Far more interesting for him than anything scientific, Spock." He was almost leering now, and Spock felt a sudden apprehension. "The Enterprise is scheduled to transport President Gallard and his daughter - and representatives of the chief officials and families of Farol - to Dinitrol, where Miss Gallard is to marry Prince Jervane - a diplomatic alliance of considerable importance. It will give Dinitrol its first links with the Federation and should in time lead to Dinitrol joining us. And Dinitrol is a wealthy planet - Spock - very wealthy. Now, should the Klingons hear of this, they might try to prevent Miss Gallard from reaching Dinitrol, so you'll have to keep a good watch. As for Miss Gallard... I noticed last night that she seemed interested in Commander Kirk - provided he's reasonably discreet he could have a most enjoyable little flirtation during the journey."

Spock rather doubted it. "If the young lady is engaged, I doubt that she would be interested in... "

"Oh Spock, Spock! I always thought you were a man of the world -- even though you're Vulcan. She's no shy virgin -- she's been a pawn in her father's political games too long for that. If even half the stories are true, Gallard's sold her favours for political backing quite a few times. At least two of his political rivals switched allegiance recently because of it -- at least, that's what's said. And Jervane is like Gallard -- not above selling her favours for what it'll get him. She'll probably be quite glad to choose a lover for herself for once."

Or perhaps, Spock thought hopefully, she'll be glad of someone who doesn't try to bed her.

"Of course," Devlin went on, "she'll be able to choose herself at least one lover on Dinitrol -- it's customary for members of the Royal Family -- even the Princess -- to have an official lover -- sometimes several."

Spock found himself wondering how much of this to pass on to Jim. As little as will serve, he thought. I can't protect him from everything, no matter how much I'd like to -- I won't so betray his trust in me. Besides, it would probably hurt him to know that she's little better than a prostitute.

He discussed the mission with Devlin for some minutes, then excused himself and returned to the Enterprise, reasonably confident that the Starbase's commander had not guessed the truth.

Kirk met him in the transporter room. "Well?" he asked cheerfully. "What world-shaking mission have we been given this time?"

Spock told him; Kirk's expression changed ludicrously. Spock resolutely kept his face expressionless as Kirk said blankly, "Engaged? But last night she was... She tried..."

"According to Devlin, her father has several times...er...encouraged her to seduce his political rivals -- she can expect Jervane to do the same. She didn't even choose him as her husband. Can you blame her for wanting one lover she has chosen herself?"

"No..." Kirk said quietly, aware of an intense pity for the girl. "But I wish she'd picked someone else."

* * * * *

The Presidential party beamed aboard later in the day. Spock assigned several of the senior officers to escort their passengers to their quarters -- Charlene Masters, as senior woman on board, escorted the President's daughter, who looked in vain for Kirk -- Spock had left him in command. Not that it was necessary for a senior officer to be on the bridge at that moment. Cowardice it might be, thought Kirk, but it's easier to avoid her than having to say 'no'. Though he knew that it was only a temporary respite; eventually he would have to face her.

He managed to avoid her, however, until that evening, when Spock held the customary formal dinner in honour of his distinguished passengers. He would gladly have given it a miss had it been at all possible; but the junior officers would have wondered -- they were already surprised that he had remained on duty when those distinguished passengers arrived. However, there would be plenty of company; it should be relatively easy to avoid a tete a tete thereafter -- he could always plead pressure of work.

"I understand that Starships have an extensive recreational facility," the President said as the meal drew to a close.

"Yes," McCoy replied. "Our missions frequently take some time -- as for

example this one, a five week journey to Dinitrol. Even when we get there, not many of the crew will have the chance to leave the ship. So it is necessary for their continued mental health that the ship has a wide range of entertainment available. Mostly the usual things - chess, cards and so on; there's a small bowling alley and some theatrical props, and of course we carry a lot of book and film tapes. Then there's an area for anyone with specialised hobbies - three or four of them have turned part of the hydroponics unit into a 'garden', for example. Everything's in pots, of course, but they've been pretty ingenious in laying it out, and in picking compatible plants from different planets."

"I'd like to see that," Karen said. She looked invitingly at Kirk. "Will you show me, Mr. Kirk?"

As Kirk searched his mind for a tactful excuse, her father smiled tolerantly, even benignly. Spock put in evenly, "Would you not prefer to be conducted round the 'garden' by one of the crewmen responsible for it - Mr. Sulu, for example? He could tell you far more about it than Mr. Kirk, whose interest in plants is primarily botanical."

Kirk threw him a grateful glance, hoping that the President and his daughter would never learn of the hours he had spent discussing gardens with T'Pol while Spock listened, slightly bored by the technicalities - in that at least he resembled his counterpart - but pleased that his friend was happy.

"No," Karen said. "They'd get too involved. I'd rather hear about everything from someone who just knows where the plants come from. You're not doing anything this evening, are you, Mr. Kirk?"

"No," Kirk admitted, uneasily and only half truthfully. He had hoped to spend the remainder of the evening with Spock, but he guessed that the President, no less than the girl, would consider it an insult if he admitted preferring the company of his Captain to that of a young and good-looking girl, even though she was engaged. He forced himself to add, "I'll be delighted to show you round," and could only hope that the words, and his polite smile, masked his reluctance. 'You lie very badly, James' - the cold words echoed in his mind, and while nothing of importance was involved here, he shrank from hurting Karen's feelings.

The group broke up shortly thereafter, the President heading for his quarters, and the rest of the senior officers to continue their own pursuits while the other guests headed for the recreation room that had been made available to them. Spock hesitated for a moment as Kirk caught his eye, and responded to the mute plea.

"I do have some matters I would like to discuss with you later this evening, Mr. Kirk - if you would come to my quarters, perhaps...two hours from now?"

"Yes, Captain." Kirk's only regret was that Spock had not made it one hour, but he supposed Spock was right - it would take some time to show Karen the garden properly.

Kirk searched his mind for a topic of conversation as he escorted Karen along the corridor, aware of the envious glances thrown in his direction by the crewmen they passed. Little did those men know that he would willingly have changed places with any one of them. It had been easy enough to talk to her at the dinner...why should it be so difficult now? You weren't alone with her then, an inner voice reminded him.

Eventually - as the silence began to make itself felt - Kirk said almost desperately, "What was your garden like at home, Miss Gallard?"

"Karen," she said. "Not much fun. Presidential gardens are kept so formal that you can never find a quiet corner to be alone. I do hope the 'garden' here isn't formal."

"Not terribly," Kirk answered, fractionally more at ease now with this

slightest of reminders that they had found many interests in common the evening before. "Of course, it's all in pots, as McCoy said, but they managed to get some trailing species, climbers and creepers that disguise the pots quite a bit."

"Do many people go there? Do you?"

Kirk shook his head. "Only to check the progress of any experiment my staff happen to be conducting. I prefer the garden of Spock's home on Vulcan. Especially in the evening when it's cool - cool for Vulcan, that is," he added ruefully. "That makes it an average warm summer day for a Human. The night flowering plants have such a distinctive scent..."

"I thought Captain Spock said your interest in plants was botanical," she laughed.

"Oh, it is!" Kirk hastened to assure her. "The scent attracts the evening insects necessary to pollinate the flowers. That's the reason it's so distinctive. But we can't have insects in here - the plants have to be pollinated by hand. Not nearly so interesting to watch."

"I think you're just afraid of letting Captain Spock realise you're far more romantic than the Vulcans. But why bother? As long as you do your work properly it surely doesn't matter how Human you are when you're off duty."

"Scientists can't afford to be romantic," Kirk said, rather flatly.

"Is that why you don't have a girl friend on board?" Karen asked. "Or..." playfully, "...perhaps you do, but she's one of the juniors."

"A senior officer can't afford to have a liason with one of the junior crew-women," Kirk said, a little sharply. "Even if I was to marry one of the yeomen, we wouldn't be allowed to serve on the same ship. It's considered bad for discipline. There's a special set of rules for the Vulcans, for biological reasons, but for all the other races the rule is, one rank below or above. That means the only woman on board I could approach within the regulations is the Chief Engineer, and she isn't going to look at anyone who isn't also an engineer."

"So what do you do about it?"

Profoundly uneasy, Kirk answered, "Nothing. There are more things in life than sex. Here's the hydroponics unit."

She was silent as he led her into the 'garden' section and began to explain where the various plants came from, aware that his voice was slightly unsteady. Her presence was making him feel decidedly uncomfortable; he wished Sulu and some of his friends would appear, cheerful and talkative, to take some of the pressure off him.

He paused beside one particularly beautiful flower, a great mauve disc fully eight inches in diameter, and stroked the petals lightly. They moved, responding to his touch; the plant gave a squeaking sound that made Karen jump.

"What... What is it?"

Kirk smiled slightly. "Sulu calls her 'Gertrude' - Janice Rand calls him 'Beauregard'," he replied. "It's a sensitive plant from one of the border planets - there's no actual intelligence that we can detect - other than that shown by all plants - no sign of independent thought. The movement and 'voice' seem to be a sort of defence mechanism - it responds to and seems to return affection, and squeals and retracts quite abruptly if it senses danger. It's got a secure 'home' here, rarely shows the 'danger' signal, but even with the security it knows it still hasn't learned complete confidence. If you touch it you'll see what I mean."

Karen reached out tentatively and touched a petal lightly. The plant gave an off-key squeal and half retracted; Karen jumped back, startled.

"Try again," Kirk suggested.

She did so, slightly less nervously; the petal was velvet soft, and very pleasant to touch. She stroked with increasing confidence as the flower slowly emerged again and opened fully, uttering its soft squeak.

"It recognises people," Kirk said. "It'll remember you now. We've thought several times of trying to get another - it does seem to carry both pollen and ovary, but it clearly will not self-pollinate; with another one we could cross-pollinate. But we've never been back in the area to get another. Oh well, one day..." He turned away ready to move on.

Karen moved closer, leaning against him. "Mr. Kirk...Jim..." she said, her voice husky. "I'm not one of your crew..."

His body had tensed involuntarily. "Miss...Miss Gallard," he said nervously. "You are engaged - on your way to be married..."

"Pfui!" she exclaimed, pouting slightly. "A marriage of convenience, a diplomatic necessity. Once it was Princesses who were State pawns - now it's Presidents' and Ambassadors' daughters." She sounded slightly bitter.

"Your father..."

"As long as I don't get pregnant, and act discreetly, he doesn't care. Why should he? He started me in this...career. And I won't get pregnant - I take my regular contraceptive shots. It's a pity you've to report to the Captain tonight, but we could have a good hour..." She linked her arm through his, and Kirk felt a familiar dread creep over him. She wanted to use him... He stiffened, mentally screaming for Spock.

"Miss Gallard, I am Vulcan-trained - which means that I've adopted many Vulcan attitudes." Despite himself his voice was shaking considerably, and he knew she'd jump to the wrong conclusion.

"You want me - you know you want me," she murmured softly. "There's no need to worry about customs that aren't Human. Who's to know, if we don't tell?"

Kirk shivered apprehensively. She took it for desire barely held in check. "Come on," she murmured. "Come down to my cabin..."

The intercom buzzed. "Mr. Kirk."

Kirk took a deep breath of relief that she thought was frustration. "Excuse me."

She hung onto his arm. "Must you?"

"I am First Officer," he pointed out. "I'm never completely off duty. It might be nothing, but it could be important."

She released him reluctantly and he headed for the intercom, praying that it was indeed important. "Kirk here."

"Could you come down to sickbay, Mr. Kirk." It was McCoy's voice.

"Now?" Even as he spoke Kirk hoped the girl wouldn't recognise his eagerness to escape. If she did it would surely hurt her terribly.

"Yes, now. This is urgent, Jim."

"Very well, Bones - on my way." He flicked off the intercom and looked at Karen. Safe now, he could afford to sound regretful. "Duty," he said simply. "Sorry. Can you find your way back to your cabin from the elevator?" He was already ushering her towards the door.

"Yes. Er...Jim?"

"Yes?"

"Perhaps another night?"

"I can't promise," Kirk muttered, determined that there would not be

night' if he could avoid it. "As I said, the First Officer is always on call. I never know when I'll be free, or for how long." The elevator doors swished shut behind them. "Deck five."

"Try?"

Kirk smiled weakly.

He found both Spock and McCoy in the surgeon's office and joined them hastily and with undisguised relief.

"So you did need help," McCoy growled.

"Yes. I was never so glad of anything as that intercom, Bones - thanks."

"What exactly happened?" Spock asked. "I sensed you calling for me, and that you were apprehensive...but I thought it better to ask the doctor to summon you."

Kirk gave a long sigh. "That girl's a menace," he said bluntly. "Another five minutes and she'd have raped me."

"Would that have been so terrible?" McCoy asked, genuinely puzzled; it had been in his mind that a skilled seduction might be just the thing to overcome Kirk's sexual reluctance. "You'd still have been..." He broke off at the look on Kirk's face.

"Bones, I can't. I know all the biological reasons why I should be able to, but I still can't convince myself that I would enjoy it - or that I wouldn't cause my partner pain... So - I'm physically unable to respond. Can you imagine how she would react?"

McCoy said, very slowly, "Her pride would be hurt...that she couldn't rouse you..."

"She might even laugh... Bones, being impotent doesn't bother me...but..."

"You'd rather nobody knew."

"Yes. Because they'd wonder why."

"None of their business," the doctor said gruffly.

Spock glanced at him, remembering McCoy's response when he had said much the same thing, but remained silent.

Kirk sighed again. "There's another thing," he said. "Lt. Moreau."

"Moreau? Your second in the lab?"

"Yes. I've seen her look at me... I think she's in love with me - and while I can't respond to her either, I don't want to hurt her."

"Jim, it might be better to let her see now, with Karen, that she hasn't any hope," McCoy said quietly.

"I don't want to use Karen like that either," Kirk said firmly.

Relaxing appreciatively in the comfortable cabin that had been assigned to her, Karen Gallard considered the forthcoming voyage with more anticipation than she had expected to feel. She wanted a diversion, she knew; although she would have to be discreet, here on the Enterprise she would for the weeks of this journey be effectively in limbo, between one life and the next. She intended to make the most of that chance.

Jervane would not be too demanding a husband, she knew - indeed, it was an established custom on Dinitrol that a married woman might take a lover of her own choice if her obligations to her husband were fulfilled. Karen was

aware that many of her future subjects would vie for her favours, but in these last weeks she wanted - needed - a man who responded to the woman Karen Gallard, not to the Princess of Dinitrol.

There was plenty of choice - the officers of the Enterprise included some attractive men; Karen smiled at the thought that indeed there was almost too much choice.

Reluctantly, she dismissed the Captain; Spock would be an unusual and interesting lover, and it would certainly be an accomplishment to seduce a Vulcan, but she knew her limitations - men of his race were notorious for their reluctance to engage in casual sex.

But...there were other possibilities. The doctor? He was attractive, and she thought he would be kind, but she had the uncomfortable feeling that he would see through her in a moment; he might be willing to oblige, but it would be on his terms, not hers.

Sulu? Chekov? Both appealed to her, and she might have been tempted for a night, but she wanted...something more.

Suddenly Karen laughed in rueful honesty; she had known all along who she really wanted. Kirk. Since the ball he had not been far from her thoughts, and his appearance at the dinner tonight had only reinforced the attraction he had for her.

What was it about him that drew her so strongly? He was good-looking, certainly - even beautiful - but she had known other, more physically exciting men. Propping her chin on her hands she thought deeply, trying to pinpoint exactly what it was about him that made him different.

She had danced with him several times at the ball, and had been intrigued by his curious blend of shyness and self-possession. He had treated her with a delicate courtesy she had never encountered before, seeming to enjoy her company; but he had displayed none of the arrogant male assurance most men employed to interest her.

His arms had been gentle when he held her, guiding her in the steps of the dance, but he had not taken the opportunity to press her close. Their conversation had been interesting, with none of the sly sexual innuendo she so often found tedious and repetitive; and he had gazed at her with admiration, frankly enjoying her beauty while making no attempt to possess it. Indeed, it had been she who eventually suggested that they walk in the garden...pity his Captain had chosen just that moment to interrupt...pity the doctor had called him tonight.

From all she had heard Earthmen were not usually so shy when an attractive woman made her interest plain; could it be that he was...inexperienced? He had implied as much. Her pulses quickened at the thought - it would be a novel and interesting experiment to awaken the slumbering sensuality in those innocent eyes.

Supremely confident in her beauty, Karen had not the least doubt that she could win Kirk; he was obviously a career officer, dedicated to his ship - that probably explained his air of naivety if he never allowed himself to relax and enjoy the usual diversions of a Starfleet officer. And as First Officer for a Vulcan Captain, she thought, he probably had very little opportunity to do so even if he wished - custom demanded that he be always at his superior's side save when duty forced him to be elsewhere, and Spock would certainly never consider that his young subordinate might occasionally feel the need for some lighter relaxation. Otherwise why should even the First Officer be always on call? She would have expected him to have some off-duty time when one of the other senior officers dealt with any routine matters that required attention, especially on a journey as straightforward as this one.

Yet...there was more to it than that. She had seen how Kirk's glance

flickered shyly away from those couples at the ball who had made their attraction to each other a little too plain, and had sensed in him an unusual degree of fastidiousness, a shrinking from such blatant displays of passion.

She was certain that he was capable of desire, but how easy would it be to arouse him? He had certainly maintained control in the ship's garden - how close had she come to seducing him? This voyage should indeed prove... diverting.

When Kirk met Karen next day she seemed to have forgotten her offer; she was charming, chattering gaily, and Kirk found himself relaxing slightly, not knowing that Karen had done some thinking - and had been the recipient of some firm paternal advice - after she left him the night before.

"Don't rush him," the President had warned. "That's the best way to frighten him off. Remember, he's Vulcan-trained, and he knows you're engaged. To him that says 'hands off'. If you want him, Karen, you'll have to be more subtle."

So now she chattered inconsequentially, setting herself to entertain Kirk. This idle party-type conversation was undemanding, unthreatening; it was something he could respond to without apprehension. His response encouraged her. Yes, perhaps her father was right; this shy, oddly self-confident young man probably had acquired some Vulcan moral scruples - she knew how obsessively important Vulcans regarded marital fidelity. Frustrating, yet somehow refreshing, to find a man who regarded chastity as important.

But it's stupid! she thought. I wouldn't be depriving Jervane of anything - he's got three official mistresses already, and god knows how many unofficial ones! But it gave her an idea - perhaps, when the time came...

The voyage proceeded without incident, despite Devlin's fears that the Klingons might somehow hear of the proposed marriage and try to stop them reaching Dinitrol. But for Kirk and Spock it was a frustrating time, for they rarely saw each other except when they were on duty. President Gallard occupied a great deal of Spock's free time, taking advantage of the journey to learn at first hand what Spock had seen of the many varied cultures he had visited in the course of his career.

"I am not wholly satisfied with the constitution we have on Farol," he admitted. "There are some excellent points that can be incorporated from the Federation's laws, but I am sure you have come across many, possibly individual, laws that are of great benefit to their culture."

Spock suppressed a faint sigh, reflecting that the most fortunate cultures had usually been the ones with the simplest laws. There had been one culture in his original universe that had had no laws that he could ever discover, yet was the most peaceful, co-operative society he had ever encountered. He decided not to mention it - not only was he uncertain that it existed in this universe, it might be less than tactful to tell a career politician that the most successful culture of Spock's experience had had no politicians!

It threw Kirk - as her father had intended - more and more into Karen's company. He was not wholly averse to this; he liked the girl, found her entertaining company, and now that she had apparently accepted his moral stand and was no longer openly flirting with him he felt more at ease with her.

If she was piqued that he rarely spoke of himself and his past she gave no sign of it; she accepted the bald statement that he was an orphan with no known relatives at its face value, saying only, "Don't you regret not having any relatives to go home to?"

Kirk shook his head. "I do have a home," he said. "On Vulcan, with

Spock's parents."

The quiet statement gave her pause. He must be even more Vulcanised than she had thought...but his genes were Human, she remembered. The demands of his Human blood would overcome instilled Vulcan habits. So she chattered on, about herself, her past...but rarely her future.

Kirk thought he could guess why. 'State pawns', she had said; she must be worried about her future, what it held for her, married to a stranger, a man many years her senior, living on a planet light years from her home, her family... He could even, almost, understand her anxiety to go to bed with him - someone young that she had chosen, not a diplomatic alliance with a man old enough to be her father. She probably hadn't even been given the opportunity to refuse.

Her situation, indeed, was roughly comparable to what his had been with the Captain. There was no reason to suppose her betrothed to be a man of sadistic tendencies, and of course she would have the backing of a powerful father who would certainly resent it if his daughter was blatantly ill-treated; but even so, her position was not a happy one, and he could only admire the courage with which she accepted her future. He suspected that at times her gaiety was forced, artificial...to hide her fear. And there was nothing he could do to help her.

McCoy watched as the relationship between his friend and the President's daughter developed.

At first he was frankly delighted by Kirk's new attitude. This was just what was needed - a light, uncomplicated affair with no commitment on either side, affectionate enough to satisfy the romantic in Kirk, passionate enough to prove to him that sex need not be painful and humiliating. So he smiled indulgently when he saw the two together in the rec rooms, or at one of the informal parties the younger officers liked to arrange, and at which Kirk was always now a welcome guest when he chose to attend; and believing that Kirk had managed to overcome his original scruples he was thankful that his young friend was - at last - beginning to respond as a normal, healthy male to Karen's femininity.

Certainly it relieved his mind of one worry - the general gossip about Kirk's lack of interest in women died down almost completely; people began to remember the regulations regarding crew liaisons - something that few of the crew needed to worry about since most were Ensigns or Lieutenants - deciding that Kirk had simply been obeying these regulations. But...

Karen Gallard was engaged; travelling to her wedding. Certainly her father didn't seem to mind how outrageously she flirted...but even so; she was engaged.

Was Jim really attracted to the girl? If so he could be badly hurt yet again even although he did know that she was not free. Or... Was he indulging in what was a relatively safe flirtation, despite his initial determination that he wouldn't use Karen to brush off Marlena Moreau.

Either way, however, it was a good sign. Perhaps now Jim would accept 'almost being raped' with something of the enthusiasm that most Human males would show. There was, after all, nothing physically wrong with him; the problem was entirely psychological. McCoy knew, none better, that to solve a psychological problem the patient must first want that problem to be solved. Up till now Jim had had no incentive to adjust his sexual thinking from undesired homosexuality to desired heterosexuality; of course he wanted to remain within the regulations. His first two encounters with Karen Gallard were before he really got to know her - now, of course, he must be beginning to desire her... mustn't he?

And yet, McCoy could not feel fully reassured - Kirk's gaiety still seemed a trifle forced. Perhaps it would be as well to warn Spock that Kirk might still need help.

As Dinitrol drew nearer Kirk found himself growing more and more concerned about Karen Gallard's future. Pity mingled with the liking he had for her; perhaps he could save her - there was one possibility.

He liked Karen, and while she did not arouse him he could admire her beauty, and knew himself to be envied for the preference she showed him. As he saw it, she was caught in the same trap that had so recently held him, so that he felt an instinctive sympathy for her. That she was fond of him, he knew; he was also aware that she found him attractive, and in his innocence he assumed that she must therefore love him, for he accepted that her past affairs had not been of her own choosing. That same innocence also made him confuse his own liking and pity for her with love, for he had never learned what that relationship should be; and he assumed that, once married to someone he cared for, the question of his impotence might perhaps solve itself painlessly.

He intended to propose to her, and was certain that she would accept, if only to free herself from an unwanted tie - many marriages had been founded on less, he thought; and his only reason for delay was his wish to settle their future in his own mind before he broke the news to Spock.

Hopefully, he could continue with his career; Karen had been brought up to understand the importance of duty, and it would be possible to establish a home on one of the Starbases to which he could return between tours of duty.

There was of course the possibility that Karen might not wish for such long partings, and in that case... The only alternative was that he resign his active commission and accept a shore posting. Which would mean leaving Spock.

Each time his thoughts reached that point he stopped, appalled. How could he leave Spock? The Vulcan had sacrificed everything for him, had given him a home, a family at last; more, Spock needed him...as he needed Spock, he acknowledged frankly. The dilemma haunted him, his wish to save Karen, his longing for a normal life warring with his affection for the Vulcan.

And there was no advice he could seek. If Spock even suspected that he might wish to leave he would ruthlessly sacrifice his own wishes to Kirk's happiness; and McCoy... McCoy could not begin to understand.

Whatever he did, someone would be hurt. Karen, whom he wished to protect as he had been protected; or Spock, forced back into the agonising isolation he had paid such a price to escape.

Worst of all was the knowledge he could not begin to deny, that however much he thought he loved Karen, if he left Spock for her the day would come when his heart would cry out for the Vulcan, for the steady, undemanding, but vitally necessary companionship they shared, and which no infatuation of the flesh could replace.

On the last evening before planetfall Kirk invited Karen down to the hydroponics unit. He could feel something tense in her attitude as he led her through the massed plants, pausing only to greet the sensitive plant in passing. Yes, she was definitely afraid, he thought.

He led her to the seats that were placed in one corner of the room. "Karen," he began tentatively.

"Yes, Jim?"

"Karen, you haven't said much about it, but I know you're not happy with

your proposed marriage. You don't have to marry Jervane. You could marry someone else. I would... It would make me very happy if you were to marry me."

"Marry you?" she exclaimed, obviously startled. There was a short pause, then, "Jim, I appreciate the offer, but you're nobody - not even a Captain in Starfleet. This marriage will make me important - Jervane has several mistresses, but he's never offered marriage to anyone before this. But Jim, I can give you a more important position than you have ever had, than you will ever have in Starfleet. Resign and come with me as my lover - my husband will only require my services half a dozen times a year, and not even the Princess is expected to remain celibate the rest of the time - we'd be free to enjoy ourselves, and with perfect propriety according to the customs on Dinitrol. Think of it, Jim - the social success you'd be...and all the women envying me for having you!" She saw the expression on his face and misinterpreted it. "I told you, Jim - it's customary on Dinitrol for the Royal Family to have lovers. My husband won't mind - why should he? I'd be thought strange if I didn't have a lover. And if we get tired of each other it's easy to part, no hard feelings on either side...we could remain friends, you'd still have the prestige of a court position, and the other women would queue up for your favours..."

"No!" The revolted denial burst from him. "Karen, I would have married you, but I won't be used by you! If position and social importance mean more to you than an honest man's love, then have them - but don't try to have it both ways." He took a deep breath, controlling himself. "I'll take you back to your cabin now."

At her door he paused. "Goodnight, Miss Gallard," he said formally. Then, quietly, "I hope you never have any reason to regret your choice. May you live long - and prosper." He inclined his head slightly and walked briskly away.

* * * * *

KAREN'S DIARY

Jim Kirk proposed to me last night.

I must admit it was completely unexpected...and yet it's typical of his honesty - and his innocence.

I realise now that what attracted me to him was that honesty - and that innocence. He wanted me, I could tell - he wouldn't have been so tense in my presence if he didn't - but unlike all the men my father sold me to he has standards of behaviour he has set for himself...or perhaps the Vulcans set them for him.

Was I trying to prove that a man with moral standards doesn't exist? If I was, I failed. His strength of purpose survived even when I suggested that he could come to Dinitrol as my official lover - an honourable position - but he would not.

I am sure that he is in fact virgin...and whoever he eventually marries need never fear that he will be unfaithful; his vows will be for life.

I am too used to a successful social life - too fond of the gaiety and importance that go with my position - to give it up, to settle quietly to being the wife of a Starship officer... But oh, I wish - how I wish - that it could have been different...that I could have accepted him.

* * * * *

THE CAPTAIN

The usual honour guard attended the beamdown of the Presidential party. No casual onlooker would have guessed at the undercurrents of emotional misunderstanding that were present. Kirk would have preferred to remain absent,

but courtesy demanded that he attend. He stood quietly at Spock's side throughout.

When Kyle signalled beamdown complete Kirk nodded an acknowledgement and left the transporter room to wander aimlessly along the corridors, confused by the storm of conflicting emotions that flooded him. Spock, understanding that Kirk needed time to think, let him go.

Karen had gone, taking with her his hopes of a normal life and marriage, Kirk thought. Yet mingled with his sadness was a feeling he was not yet prepared to admit - a sense of profound relief. She had tried again, promising so much, tempting him to accept her offer; but while part of his mind urged him to accept, at least for a time (as any normal man would have done, he reflected bitterly), the Captain's terrified victim retreated in protest. There would be pain, humiliation, loss of his dearly-bought privacy...he did not want it.

The sane, thinking part of his mind accepted that a physical relationship could be wonderful, fulfilling for both partners, but the lessons of his first teacher were too deeply engrained, and he knew, in the innermost part of his being, that he would again experience shame and fear, discomfort at best, acute pain at worst.

But his own overriding emotion was anger. He had been...fond of Karen; perhaps in his own way he was beginning to love her; certainly he had cared enough to overcome his fears and offer her marriage to free her from a political alliance he thought she dreaded - only to have his hesitant proposal flung back in his face. She wanted the marriage, desiring the social and political prominence it would give her - but she also wanted Kirk. He writhed in shame at the memory of her insulting offer to him.

As always when confused, or hurt, or tired, there was one unfailing refuge he sought with blind instinct, and he fled in search of it now, pressing the buzzer and entering without waiting for the customary permission.

Spock glanced up from his desk at Kirk's impetuous entrance. He was concerned about the Human's evident distress, but was also pleased that Kirk had gained so much in confidence that he would come in so precipitately, without hesitating apparently timidly outside his quarters for permission as he had normally done in the past.

Realising what he had done, Kirk pulled himself together. "I'm sorry, Spock," he said guiltily. "I interrupted you..."

"You are always welcome, Jim," the Vulcan replied, rising. "Please, sit down."

Kirk shook his head and paced the cabin restlessly, wondering how to ask the question that had been tormenting him. Spock waited, wanting to help, unsure of how he could.

"She left after all," Spock said, finally breaking the silence.

So he knew! Kirk thought. He knew I wanted her to stay. "Yes, she's gone, and I won't be seeing her again." Kirk laughed bitterly. "I offered to marry her...I thought there was a chance... Anyway, she refused me. Instead, she made a counter proposal." The Vulcan's eyes dropped before the bitterness in Kirk's. "I could go with her - as her lover. Such arrangements are permitted, she said. She was willing enough to go to bed with me, but she wouldn't marry me - I'm not important enough, it seems. And I thought she cared for me..."

His restless pacing brought him to Spock; like a drowning man's his hands reached out to clutch the strong shoulders.

"It made me realise - even if she'd married me, would she have remained faithful? She said her father sold her, but she must have begun to enjoy it -

the variety, the...the..." He could not finish the thought. "Is that all I am, Spock? Only a beautiful body to satisfy for a time the lusts of those who... desire me? All I ever wanted...was to be loved. Is that so much to ask?"

Spock forced himself to look up, and a wave of physical pain swept through him at the sight of Kirk's eyes, wide with anguish, bright with the tears that only a supreme effort of will kept from falling. The shame and misery in those eyes was too great to be borne; Spock pulled Kirk closer, holding him comfortingly, trying to infuse some of his own strength into his friend.

His heart ached for Kirk, guessing how much he had built on his growing affection for Karen; he was so gentle, so vulnerable, this beloved Human, and once again he had been cruelly hurt. McCoy had predicted some such crisis, and like a fool he had failed to prevent it. Yet, beforehand, what could he - or anyone - have done? Yet perhaps now there was a way he could help.

"Jim," he said quietly, "there is another who can answer that question better than I."

Kirk looked up, puzzled. "Who?"

"The Captain."

Kirk's face convulsed. "Don't mock me, Spock. I can't bear it - not from you."

"I am serious. You know that he loved you."

"Loved?" Kirk laughed harshly. "He didn't know the meaning of the word. Do you think a few words forced out of him as he lay dying could wipe out all the years of pain and humiliation he gave me? He didn't care for me...he took, always, and gave nothing in return, not even the comfort of knowing that he valued me. His wishes always counted, mine never did... He would have sacrificed me to his ambition without a moment's thought, and turned to seek another victim."

"Do you believe that? But why should you not? Jim, I retained one of his log tapes - I think that you should listen to it."

"No!" Kirk twisted away. "I don't want to hear it!"

"It will...ease your mind, I think."

"To hear his voice again!" Kirk whispered, shuddering.

"I know, I know." Spock's hands gripped again, tighter. "But I have heard the tape, Jim - will you not trust my judgement?"

The Human nodded reluctantly, and obediently followed Spock to a chair, watching nervously as the Vulcan removed a tape from his safe, carefully broke the seal, and slotted it into the player.

"It is audio only, Jim," Spock said, handing him the earpiece. "I think it best that you listen in privacy, but I will be at my desk should you need me."

He touched Kirk's shoulder for a moment, then left him to return to the papers he had been studying, though he paid them scant attention. After a moment he glanced up - Kirk was still sitting as he had left him, making no attempt to play the tape. Spock waited anxiously; Kirk had made remarkable progress, but the scars that the Captain had inflicted still ran deep. Then with delight he saw the Human's lips set into a firm, resolute line; his hand rock-steady, Kirk reached out and switched on the player.

As the familiar, hated voice filled his ears, reciting the stardate, Kirk repressed an involuntary shudder. The recording had been made shortly after the last visit he and the Captain had made to Vulcan; it was during shore leave on Calderon, the too-well-remembered time when the Captain had almost...

He pushed the memory away firmly, wondering, for a fleeting instant, why no-one else seemed to notice the difference between the two voices...he himself

never had any difficulty in distinguishing between them...or was it merely that the Commodore's voice only held that note for him?

Then, aware that he was seeking an excuse not to listen, he concentrated on the insidious, seductive voice that echoed so hatefully from the past.

"May the gods I do not believe in aid me now! I am Vulcan...I can control this... Control... But he lies so still... Where may I turn, I who by my own choice have driven every well-wisher from me, and with my own hands I have wrought my destruction. Ah, James, I enslaved you...but your eyes hold me as securely...

Such a trivial matter... I cannot even remember what it was... But he angered me. I summoned him to an accounting, and fancied his response defiantly slow. I beat him as he cowered submissively at my feet, beat him until his pitiful weeping choked into silence, until even my most savage blows produced no further reaction - he lay unmoving. I dropped the whip at last, and washed his blood from my hands contentedly; he tried so hard, but could seldom please me, and I almost loved him for it - his many failures gave me the excuse I did not really need to punish him.

My exertions had relaxed me, and I felt again the hunger for him that is never fully satisfied, but when I leaned over him my searching fingers could not conjure the usual response from his unwilling body. Alarmed, I investigated further; his pulse was very faint, his breath came painfully, and I knew fear - I had been careless, and injured him so severely that he would need immediate medical attention. Yet how could I explain his injuries? A fall would not have caused such damage...

Logic, as always, showed me the answer. We were on shore leave on Calderon, sharing as we often did an apartment in the Star Gardens; it was an exclusive, discreet establishment, but its clients were...unreliable.

I placed him on the bed and began systematically to ransack the room; then called the Enterprise and summoned McCoy. The tremor in my voice was not feigned for his pallor and that harsh, painful breathing unnerved me.

Never had I been so glad to see the doctor! As he worked he listened to my explanation of how I had returned from an engagement at the Vulcan Embassy to find him thus, clearly the victim of thieves; McCoy's response convinced me that he suspected nothing.

But his next words were a shock; James was in danger, and must be taken at once to sickbay. We beamed directly to the ship, where he was rushed to surgery. Even as McCoy operated we were ordered away on a simple but urgent mission, so that the next few hours were occupied in recalling the crew and taking the ship out of orbit. Only when I was at last able to turn command over to Mr. Scott did I realise that there had been no word from sickbay; I went directly there, only to be told that James was still in surgery - there was no news.

McCoy came at last, and his slow step, the defeat in his usually brilliant eyes, told their own story. The broken bones, the bruised flesh would heal, but I had been more careless than I knew - there was serious bruising to the brain. It was still too early to be certain, but there was a very real danger that James would be permanently crippled in mind.

Like all the others McCoy has no idea what James is to me. With rough sympathy he told me to go and rest, he would call me when there was anything to report. I refused, of course; I would not leave my d... my property in the hands of another.

But it was useless. I could win no response from that pale, silent figure, and I fancied that he had chosen this method of escape; foolish, but my usual clear thinking seemed to have deserted me.

At last I yielded to McCoy's urgings and rose to leave, taking a final look

at the shuttered face. How young he looked, and how vulnerable, the pale skin so clear against the flame-gold covering of the bed. His face was unmarked - my blows must have been hidden by his hair. Strangely, he seemed at peace... he never looked so tranquil when he slept in my arms...

So I returned to my quarters, but not to sleep. It seems that I must face the possibility of losing him, and if so I must decide what I will do.

My first option is simple, logical and obvious; he will be useless to Starfleet, he has no family to care for him - I need only let normal procedure take its course and he will be committed to the nearest Starfleet hospital for the rest of his life. No further responsibility will be mine, I can forget him...

... And yet... And yet I feel a curious reluctance to take this easy course. Hospitals for the insane are well run, I am told, but I have heard stories... Sometimes the attendants in such places, brutalised by their hopeless task, amuse themselves by tormenting their helpless charges. Why should that disturb me? I have done as much... Yet it troubles me oddly to think of him at the mercy of another, perhaps forced by some orderley seeking a moment's pleasure from his body. He is still my property, and I will not have him so used. That option then I must reject.

I might, of course, take responsibility for him, send him home to Vulcan where my parents will care for him if I request it. There will be no risk of betrayal, for he will be unable to speak of what I have done, and I can easily guard him against accidental intrusion by another telepath. If I take this course I will still control him, he will always be there awaiting my return.

However, that solution does not please me either. He is still beautiful, his body undamaged, and I know that I will want to make use of him; but on Vulcan he will be out of my reach for long periods of time, and I cannot be certain he will be with me when pon farr strikes. I have considered taking another mate from among the crew...that slim, graceful helmsman, or the dark-eyed Chekov...but they do not call to me as he does, even now. it is his cool body, his warm trembling lips, his anxious submissiveness that I need. What matter that he cannot know to whom he yields? It was never his mind I valued. I dare not face pon farr without him, so...

My third choice. The one I have known all along I must make. He will go to Vulcan, yes - but I will go with him. Not to my parents' house, for I do not wish them to know what he is to me; but I will make a refuge for us where I may live out my days in contemplation of my handiwork as I care for him.

Here in this log, which only I will ever hear, I must admit the truth. He is of the race I have learned to hate, he is weak, submissive, so easily frightened - everything I should despise; and yet - I love him. I love him for his beauty, for his shy, hesitant manner, for his gentleness; and I love him too for the response I sensed in him, the instinctive rapport there was between us before I claimed him.

Was I wrong? I am Vulcan, I could do no other. To admit that I loved an inferior being would have shamed me...and to win him with soft words, to show him the gentleness he longs for...to express love as he could understand it... these things I have never learned. I obeyed the call of my blood and took what I wanted from him; now I pay the price, and it is bitter indeed - but I will pay it.

I will never sit on the Federation Council now, never earn the respect and admiration that are my due. For me, only the obscurity of an isolated home on Vulcan, my sole companion this so dear one.

But...perhaps there will be compensations, I need not fear to lose him, for who would wish to steal him from me now? He will always be there for me, for I know that the damage I have done to his mind will not prevent me from enjoying his body...and lacking memory, perhaps now he will turn to me with trust.

It may even be that as I care for him I may learn to express these emotions I do not understand. Often I have read in his mind that he would give anything for one gentle caress, one word of love from me; that may be possible now, but for him it will come too late.

Love... I have never known it. My parents... It is to them that I owe the agonies I have endured because of my mixed blood; they who bequeathed to me this legacy of emotion, and did not teach me how to cope with it. I will never forgive them for that...

The intercom! It is McCoy, summoning me to sickbay. Gods of Vulcan, give me strength to bear what I must!

An hour ago I dictated the previous log entry. Only an hour! Yet my world has been remade.

He will live, whole and sane. I scarcely know whether to be thankful or not.

McCoy left me alone beside his bed, saying that he would soon awaken. There were tests to be made, but he was confident - the bruising was less serious than he had originally thought.

Something distracted my attention for a moment and when I looked back his eyes were open, gazing at me with the expression of fear and submission I love to see there. Slowly, he took my hand and raised it to his lips in the gesture of self-abasement I have always compelled him to make, kissing the hand that hurt him.

The touch of those warm lips against my skin unnerved me; I had to escape the resignation in those patient eyes. I touched his hair in the gesture that tells him he has pleased me, and called McCoy; when he relaxed again in sleep I left him to his dreams...and what must they be like?

Now as I sit once more alone in my cabin, I must re-evaluate my intentions in the light of what I have learned about myself...and him.

He must never know what he is to me; of that, I am determined. Should he even suspect the power he has over me...

We will go on as before, for I cannot promise that I will never hurt him again, but now at least I understand what it is that drives me to such violence.

I am...ashamed; ashamed of him, and of what I feel for him. I cannot claim him as my bondmate - it would humiliate me beyond endurance to acknowledge before my family, before all Vulcan, that my Human blood had conquered at last, and betrayed me into taking so unsuitable a mate.

However, I see an answer. It is unfortunate that we visited Vulcan so recently, but when we return I will take steps to bind him to me so securely that he will never be able to leave me.

In the ancestral home of our family I will bond with him, but secretly, only he and I knowing; the vows we make will bind us together as securely as though they were spoken before the High Council in formal session...and I will so monitor his thoughts that he will not realise that I have committed myself to him as completely as I claimed him.

I must still marry, of course - it will be expected of me - and I will do my duty, but a properly-trained Vulcan wife will not even enquire into my concerns or betray me if she learned of them. So I will keep him as bedmate and as bondmate, for the span of his life and mine - I could not bear to lose him, and he will not be left behind, perhaps to enjoy the embrace of another. Certainly, it is more probable that he will die first, for despite my mixed blood my life span is greater than his, and if I follow him into a bonded death my secret will be revealed - but by then I will be beyond all humiliation and

mockery.

Ah, James, James...what are you that you can affect me so? What the end will be for us I cannot guess - and perhaps it is better so - yet here, in the privacy of my thoughts, it comes to me to wish...to wish that I could show you the love I feel, and the gentleness you crave. Perhaps then you would love me...but I cannot change, I am as my birth and upbringing have made me.

So here - and only here - dare I say... James, beloved one, forgive me. Forgive me for my inability to be the tender lover you deserve."

As he listened to the tape Kirk had been very much aware of Spock's presence; the Vulcan, working at his desk, was suddenly the only real, sane anchor left in a world gone mad.

At that last helpless, almost resentful confession of love Kirk closed his eyes, fighting back tears as he had not had to do for so many months. He was aware that the tape had ended, but he seemed unable to move; the player was switched off, the earphones removed, and gentle hands cupped his face; Kirk opened heavy eyes to meet Spock's concerned gaze.

With a convulsive movement he pulled the Vulcan down beside him, burying his face against his shoulder, seeking refuge in Spock's strength; the tears came at last, not the hysterical weeping the Captain's cruelty had torn from him, but a deeper, quieter weeping that helped to heal the pain that called it forth.

Spock held him gently, comfortingly, his light touch on Kirk's hair conveying a sense of security the Human had last known - so long ago he could scarcely remember how it felt - in his father's arms.

At last Kirk raised his head. "I don't understand," he whispered. "I thought... What did he feel for me? I'm so confused... Help me to understand, Spock."

The piteous tone of his voice, the sheer bewilderment in the confused eyes, warned Spock that the Human was very vulnerable at this moment; he was clinging so tightly to the Vulcan that only force could have moved him. Carefully Spock disengaged the clutching fingers, but allowed Kirk to lean against him, knowing that the Human felt reassured by the contact.

"Jim," he began haltingly, "you asked me if...if you were only a beautiful animal, if the only value you had was for the pleasure your body could give. To me you are not...someone to desire...though I can understand why both men and women find you attractive. My reaction is valueless, however, since you know that I am incapable of responding to you sexually.

That tape... I kept it for just this reason. You always believed that the Captain simply made use of you; such was indeed his intention, but despite himself he grew to love you...and you were the only one for whom he could admit to any tenderness at all.

I understand him a little. Ashamed of his Human blood, unable to deal with these Human emotions no-one could teach him to comprehend, he despised himself for loving one he considered inferior; he fought the attraction - and lost. His log... He betrayed himself so often, in so many ways, even before he admitted the truth to himself. He loved you for all the things he felt he ought to despise - your gentleness, your compassion, your warmth. Every effort he made to kill that love failed; finally he was prepared to take the ultimate step of bonding with you. Make no mistake, Jim - a formal bonding, even a secret one, would have bound him as securely as it bound you. Your pain, your fear, all your emotions would have become his; despite his reluctance to acknowledge you as bondmate he would have been forced to do so if Starfleet duty seemed likely to separate you, for he could not long endure to be parted from you; and with

full knowledge he deliberately intended to throw half his life away, knowing that your death would inevitably mean his.

So you see, Jim, even that wretched unhappy creature could not help loving you; he knew - though he would never have told you so - that you are more, much more - than a beautiful toy."

There was a long silence, then Kirk said slowly, "I begin to see now. It wasn't just sex, even for him. I'm...glad to know that, it makes it easier somehow. But Spock...do you know...I think that if he had...approached me gently...he could have...won me. I could have...gone to him...willingly. Is that shameful?"

"No, Jim, it is not. Your early life was such...that you have a great need to be loved. You and I... I do not fully understand the bond that holds us through so many universes. Once, while I was still searching, I discovered a time line in which you and I were bonded lovers, each joyfully consenting; so that you should feel...drawn to him...is understandable. Do not feel shame; the perversion of the bond was his doing, not yours.

The past cannot be erased, but it must not be permitted to mar your future. You were able to compel love from one unwilling to give it - that is the measure of your power.

As for Karen Gallard - do not judge her too harshly, Jim; her invitation is a custom of her people by marriage, and was intended honourably. Forgive me - but I think that you were more than a little relieved to be able to let her go. Am I not correct?"

Kirk looked up, flushing indignantly; then, meeting the patient understanding of those wise eyes, he smiled ruefully.

"Perhaps you're right, Spock." Kirk ran his fingers through his hair. "I thought I loved her, but I was always uneasy alone with her. Maybe I was only trying to prove something to myself...but whatever it was, I failed. When she beamed down to Dinitrol one half of me was sorry to see her go - the other half felt only a vast relief that I didn't have to... Spock, if I'd gone, I'd've cheated her, I couldn't have given her what she wanted. I'm still afraid; for me, physical intimacy is tied up with pain, humiliation, selfishness - I don't want any more of that in my life."

"But you would be...a very gentle lover, Jim," Spock said hesitantly.

"I'd...try to be. But I could never forget... For me, sex will always have an element of selfishness, of greed...there's been enough of that for me." He glanced up shyly. "I'd sooner have what we share, Spock. Love without desire - something clean, and wonderful, and good."

"You...love me?" Spock asked shakily.

"Yes. At first it was only gratitude, and friendship, then affection. Now it's become love - the purest, most unselfish love I've ever known. You feel it too, don't you?"

"I do," Spock said gravely, "but the first admission had to come from you, lest you should think..."

"That you want me? I know you don't - that you can't - but even if you could, you wouldn't... Oh dear!" Kirk laughed at himself. "I'm getting muddled. I think that what I want to say is - I trust you, Spock. Yes, I want to love, to be loved...and you won't ask any more of me than that."

"I am only too glad to see you content," Spock said with quiet tenderness. After a moment he continued in a more casual tone, "Come now and eat, Jim. We are both on duty in forty-five minutes."

"Lord, yes! Look at the time!" Kirk stood up, smiling again. As the Vulcan raised his hand to the door Kirk touched his arm. "Thank you, Spock."

As they emerged into the corridor the Captain and the First Officer were deep in a discussion of routine ship's business.

PART 2: THE BONDING

There was an unexpected delay at Dinitrol. A diplomatic crisis had arisen, causing some concern to the Federation, and a conference had been arranged on Babel. One of the delegates was the Vulcan ambassador who had been assigned to Dinitrol's earliest tentative negotiations with the Federation, an experienced diplomat named Selek, who in addition to being Sarek's older brother was also the head of his clan. Unlike Sarek, forced to retire early because of a heart condition, Selek was healthy, vigorous man who anticipated many more years of active life.

Starfleet had given orders that the Enterprise was to convey Selek and his family to Vulcan, wait while he was briefed on the situation, and thereafter to transport him to Babel as Vulcan's representative.

Kirk had completely recovered his composure by the time he stood at Spock's side in the transporter room, awaiting the arrival of their distinguished guests. At least this time there should be no awkwardness, he reflected with a wry grin; Selek was accompanied by his senior wife T'Kara, and their son Sendak was well-known for his involvement with a political group which was inclined to be mistrustful of Terran influence in the Federation - so it was unlikely that he would have any interest in a Human.

Spock too was confident as he waited, positive that he had learned enough from the Captain's log to avoid any mistakes in dealing with Selek. His alter-nate had despised his uncle as an unimaginative, unambitious bore, but had respected his power as clan chief too much to antagonise him; and as the two men had had little contact over the years Selek would expect from him only the deference due to his position.

The ambassador had requested an informal reception. Spock had thought it best to compromise; he had dispensed with the formal honour guard, but he and Kirk were in full dress uniform, and several other senior officers were also present.

When the three Vulcans stepped from the transporter pad Spock moved forward to exchange greetings, then beckoned Kirk to his side.

"May I present my First Officer, Commander Kirk. He will be at your service when duty requires my presence elsewhere."

Kirk stepped forward, gracefully executing the Vulcan salute. "Vulcan honours us with your presence," he said pleasantly. "We come to serve."

"Thank you, Mr. Kirk." Selek eyed the Human with interest. "Your accent is pure," he commented. "Who is your instructor?"

"My Captain, sir. The language is not easy, but I find its study a challenge - and he has great patience."

"My compliments to both pupil and teacher. Mr. Kirk, I wish to introduce my son Sendak, and T'Kara - she who is my wife."

Kirk inclined his head slightly to the haughty-looking Sendak, and bowed respectfully to T'Kara, aware that he had been honoured - men of Selek's generation did not normally introduce their women to men not of the family, or who had not been received into their homes as guests.

"Selek, perhaps you and Sendak would care to tour the Enterprise," Spock suggested. "And my officers would be honoured if you would join them for dinner."

"Of course - it will be interesting to meet them," Selek replied, "and I would welcome the chance to view this magnificent ship in greater detail."

Kirk turned to T'Kara. "May I escort you to your quarters, Ma'am? Our - "

"Really, Mr. Kirk!" Sendak interrupted coldly. "You insult my mother - it is not our custom to permit our womenfolk to associate unchaperoned with any but kinsmen and house guests."

"I am certain the Commander intended no insult," Selek broke in before Kirk could reply. "Perhaps he is not aware of our customs."

"I do know of this one, sir," Kirk said smoothly, "and I anticipated your objection. As I was about to say, our communications officer, Lt. Uhura, is in attendance, and she will be delighted to join me in escorting the Lady T'Kara. With your permission, sir?"

At Selek's nod of approval Kirk escorted the Vulcan woman away, then Selek turned to his son.

"You are too quick to imagine offence," he reproved. "Spock, I congratulate you on your First Officer - such sensitivity is unusual in a Human."

"He is valuable to me," Spock agreed. "Shall we begin our tour?"

"I would be pleased. And Spock...after dinner I wish to speak with you on a matter of some delicacy."

"Indeed?"

"As head of the family it is my duty. But later for that - now I wish to see the Enterprise."

The tour was a success, as Selek asked intelligent questions, and made valid comments at several points. Sendak accompanied them in silence, a fact for which Spock was grateful - in his previous universe he had been quite close to his cousin, but here the man's slightly old-fashioned attitudes had hardened into a rigid disapproval of outworld influence.

So pleased was Selek with his reception that he relaxed custom to allow T'Kara to attend the dinner; seated between Charlene Masters and Uhura, the two highest-ranking female officers, she obviously enjoyed the diversion offered by the company of the more extrovert Humans - especially since Kirk had had a quiet word with them, and had briefed them on Vulcan customs and manners, so that the odd mistake was accepted indulgently.

Sendak retired as soon as the meal was over, but his parents lingered; Selek became absorbed in conversation with Kirk, while T'Kara and Uhura were engrossed in a lively conversation.

At last Kirk excused himself. "I'm due on watch, sir, and must change first. If you will forgive me?"

"With regret, Mr. Kirk - I have enjoyed our discussion. Spock, will it be convenient for you to speak with me now?"

"Certainly, Selek. To ensure privacy, shall we say my quarters, in an hour?"

"That will be satisfactory. Come, my wife." The two Vulcans retired, and Spock walked with Kirk to his quarters, entering to wait while the Human changed out of his dress uniform.

"Any idea what he wants?" Kirk called from the bathroom.

Spock shrugged. "Not the slightest. As head of the clan he may merely wish to reassure himself that all is well with me."

"He didn't seem suspicious?" Kirk emerged, pulling down his blue shirt.

"No. He didn't know the Captain well, of course, and I've learned enough about him from the logs, and from Sarek, to give him the answers he expects."

"Good. There's one thing...this trip will give us a chance to go home

for a quick visit while he's being briefed - I wonder how T'Pau is getting on with those seeds I sent her?"

Spock smiled at Kirk's completely natural and unselfconscious use of the word 'home'. The young Human had a deep need to find roots, a place to belong, and in T'Pau he had an enthusiastic champion; even the undemonstrative Sarek (though he would have died rather than admit it) regarded Kirk with an almost affectionate approval.

"I had intended to tell you," Spock remembered, "I had a tape from Sarek and T'Pau this morning; I will leave it in your room, Jim, and you can listen to it when you come off duty."

"Thank you." Kirk smiled as they left his quarters and walked towards the lift. "I'll see you tomorrow, then, Spock."

The lift doors slid open, and seeing that the corridor was for the moment deserted, Spock touched his friend's shoulder in the casual gesture of affection they occasionally allowed themselves.

"Quiet watch, Jim." Then he turned and headed back to his own room.

Selek arrived punctually, and came directly to the purpose of his visit.

"Spock, I speak as your clan chief. We - the family - are greatly perturbed and so I mention a subject that is normally avoided. I refer to your delay in selecting another mate since T'Pring refused you. Have you given any thought to marriage?"

"I have considered it." Spock kept his voice steady, trying to conceal his dismay. "However, I am not fully Vulcan - it seems possible that pon farr will not affect me; if that is so I would prefer not to take a wife while I am still on active service."

"You deceive yourself, Spock." Selek leaned forward. "Your medical record shows that your physical development is fully Vulcan - though retarded, to be sure, by your Human blood. Indeed, our family physician has already expressed surprise that you have not yet experienced pon farr. I can permit no further delay - think of the risk if it should come while you are still unmated...and more, you cannot function as Captain of the Enterprise without the safeguard of a wife at your side. Our decision is final - when we reach Vulcan you will be called before the family council and instructed either to name your chosen mate, or to accept a suitable candidate who will be selected for you; the ceremony will take place before we depart for Babel. Understand...we are concerned only for your safety, nephew."

"I know; and it is of course both your right and your duty to safeguard the family."

"My concern is also for you, Spock."

"I am grateful. I will consider your words, Selek, and give you my answer in council."

"That will be satisfactory." Selek rose to leave. "Choose wisely, Spock. You are an asset to the family and to Vulcan, and I would have you content in your marriage. And now I will bid you goodnight."

Alone, Spock postponed consideration of Selek's ultimatum until he was calmer. He completed work on some routine reports, delivered the message tape to Kirk's cabin, and prepared to retire.

He was disturbed that he had not foreseen this possibility - his own impotence had for years freed him from the necessity of considering marriage. Selek could not know of course that the Captain had, in fact, reached sexual maturity and chosen his mate; he was concerned for his kinsman, and would not easily be persuaded that his fears were unfounded.

The closer the Enterprise drew to Vulcan, the greater became the intensity of Spock's anxiety. He had thought that when Sarek learned the truth the most serious threat to his safety and Kirk's had been eliminated, but he knew now that he was wrong.

This impossible marriage would expose him, whatever he did. Sarek had shielded him as long as possible, but even he could not defy the family council - Spock must marry on his return to Vulcan, and there was no appeal from that decree.

It was a nightmare situation. If he disobeyed, refused to marry, that would be certain proof of insanity, for no sane man would willingly face pon farr unbonded. He would be forcibly restrained, examined by Vulcan doctors and psychologists; the Captain's medical records would be thoroughly detailled - he could not hope to fool them for long, and his imposture would certainly be detected.

Yet if he submitted, went through with the marriage, danger still existed. His much greater powers would enable him to shield his mind from his wife, although she would certainly be able to detect that he was being less than open with her, but her duty to her husband would keep her silent, especially as he could explain it as a reluctance to inflict his Human emotionalism on her; but about another danger, his complete impotence, he could do nothing.

The bonding ceremony was supposed to trigger pon farr; when he failed to consummate the marriage his wife would complain to her family, and again he would be subjected to a medical examination. His physical condition was too radically different from the Captain's to be explained, and once suspicion was aroused the questions would begin, questions he could not hope to answer.

Spock sighed wearily; it would be embarrassing, but it might be as well to consult McCoy. It was unlikely that the doctor would have any useful advice, but he felt a sudden need to discuss the problem with a sympathetic listener. Normally he would have discussed a personal matter with Jim, but his friend's reaction to even the mention of sexual involvement made him reluctant to do so; he remembered how when the rec room conversation turned to even the most light-hearted discussion of sex Jim would soon murmur some quiet excuse and leave.

As he lay in his cabin trying vainly to sleep, Spock's all-too-Human imagination, awakened by the trend of his thoughts, began to point out in horrible detail the consequences if - when - it became known that he was not the Captain.

Whatever his reasons, Jim had killed a Vulcan; there would be no mercy for him. In his helplessness he had submitted to the Captain, had carried on his flesh the brand that marked him as a possession, with no rights beyond his master's will. Although he had explained it as the result of torture at the hands of aliens, many of his colleagues had seen the brand, and could describe it; a Vulcan court would have no difficulty in recognising its significance. Slavery was outdated on this Vulcan, but not illegal; it was held that if a man was weak enough to submit to being owned, he lost all status - the fact that Kirk was Human would be no mitigation. A master was expected to take care of a piece of valuable property, of course, but there was no compulsion on him to do so, and the slave had no right of redress.

Therefore, a Human had killed a Vulcan, a slave had slain his master - Jim would pay a terrible penalty. It would be useless to appeal to Starfleet, for by Vulcan law he was guilty, and the Federation would not interfere with the internal laws of a member; at best the authorities would say that Kirk should have appealed to them when his rights as an Earthman were breached by his Captain's treatment. Kirk would be taken from him, handed over to the Captain's clan for punishment... With a shudder Spock forced from his mind thoughts of what form that punishment might take. What his own fate might be for his part in the plot the Vulcan did not even consider - the danger to Jim was too real and hideous. It seemed so cruel - the Human had suffered so much already, was

only now beginning to enjoy life, and his new freedom would be ended...in such a way.

It would not even serve any purpose if he, Spock, refused to return to Vulcan at all; the family council would simply demand his return, and as he was a Vulcan citizen Starfleet would be bound to hand him over to the jurisdiction of his own people.

There was only one way Spock could see to save Kirk. When the Enterprise reached Vulcan he would confine his First Officer to the ship, beam down alone ... He would confess to the murder and to the impersonation, refusing to give any reason, but taking all the blame on himself. The authorities would attempt to determine the truth by mind touch, but he was confident that he could deceive them into believing exactly what he wished - no suspicion would fall on Jim. Sarek would not betray the Human's involvement, and if fortune favoured him it would all be over before Kirk learned what was happening. But he would have to be very careful until then - if Jim suspected his intention he would confess his own guilt.

It would be very hard for Kirk to accept the loss of the friend he had come to care for so deeply, but at least he would live...and McCoy would be there...

McCoy...Yes... In the morning he would speak to McCoy, and if the doctor could offer no suitable alternative he would warn him what to expect; at all costs Kirk must be protected.

Slightly more at ease now that he had reached a decision Spock turned over on his side and concentrated his mind on sleep.

A few yards away in his own quarters Jim Kirk too lay sleepless and worried. His mind persisted in going over the cause of his unease, but his thought patterns now were very different from what they had once been. Not so very long ago he would have fretted anxiously over a problem, concerned but too lacking in confidence to consider it coherently; now he surveyed the little information he had, and tried to evaluate it correctly.

Spock was worried; that was all he had to go on, really. To anyone else even that would not have been noticeable, but Kirk was so closely attuned to the Vulcan that the very presence of the rigid shields Spock maintained rang warning bells in his mind.

It could not be the ship, or anything else connected with their duties; had it been so the Vulcan would have consulted him at once, for from the first he had relied on his First Officer, even when Kirk himself was still none too confident.

It must therefore be a personal problem, something that Spock felt he had to keep from the Human. Kirk understood Spock's motives, sensing his reluctance to intrude personal concerns into his relationship with one who had suffered so much, but he was impatient - surely Spock could see how much worse it was to be kept in ignorance?

Thinking back, Kirk remembered that Spock's distraction dated from Selek's arrival...and that last message from Sarek and T'Pol. Something to do with Vulcan, then? Yet there had been nothing in the tape to suggest problems, merely family news Spock would be expected to know, and warm personal greetings for himself. As for Selek, the distinguished Vulcan had given no indication of anything being wrong. So it must be the tape; Kirk suddenly felt certain that Spock had not given him the whole message, there had been some distressing news.

Carefully Kirk checked his reasoning, convinced that he was right, and began to plan. He would wait a few days longer to see if his friend would confide in him of his own accord; and if he did not he would go to Spock, offer

to help. The Vulcan would not mistake his concern for interference, and between them surely they could **solve** the problem, whatever it was.

Having made up his mind Kirk shelved that worry for the moment and turned his attention to his own problem. It was something he had only lately become aware of, and so far he had been able to handle it, but he knew that he could not go on doing so for much longer. Now that he was mixing more with the crew some of the women on board saw in their young, good-looking and unattached First Officer a challenge to their femininity; now that Karen had gone they were making their interest plain again. Even worse, one or two crewmen whose interests lay in that direction had, on seeing his lack of response to the women in the crew, begun to eye him speculatively. As yet no direct approach had been made, but he was very much afraid that sooner or later someone would make him an offer he did not know how to deal with - regulations were, after all, often ignored.

As a young cadet Kirk had been too absorbed in his studies to indulge in the amorous diversions of the other students; on board ship, and under Pike's command, his awareness of his responsibilities and his natural fastidiousness had protected him from casual affairs - ~~attractive~~ **no night** have been, but the girls in the crew had shown little interest in the shy and withdrawn young Ensign, then Lieutenant, until his promotion to First Officer; and then they had had little time to approach him before Pike was promoted away and the Captain had come... As a result he had been still a virgin, and his sexual awakening in the Captain's arms had therefore been doubly shocking; he had been left with an utter distaste for any form of physical intimacy. Sex, to him, was a selfish, painful, humiliating indulgence - he wanted no part of it. He knew that he was not normal - most men found pleasure in sexual fantasies - but he shrank with loathing even from that. Spock understood...but no-one else ever would.

How, then, was he to deal with an unwanted approach? He had never learned to laugh and flirt, to take such matters lightly - he was afraid that his reaction would make him a laughing-stock on the ship.

What plausible reason could he give for wishing to remain celibate? He had been humiliated too often in the past to be comfortable with the idea of refusing anyone without giving a good reason, especially since such an offer could well be made out of a genuine affection and a wish to give him pleasure.

If he could have said that he was not free, that he was committed elsewhere...but Kirk was painfully aware that he could not hope to be believed. He could lie for Spock - the encounter with the Klingons, those first hours with Sarek, proved that - but when it came to acting on his own behalf the Captain's observation was correct - he lied very badly. Anyone would see through the deception, and to the humiliation of being rejected would be added the distress of knowing that Kirk had lied.

For a moment he wondered wildly if he could - just possibly - approach one of the women...perhaps Uhura, she was fond of him...and ask her to pretend... But he rejected that almost at once - it would be unfair to ask such a thing with no explanation, and even if she agreed he could not expect her to give up her own relationships for a meaningless charade with him. So what could he do?

Normally he would have turned to Spock for advice, but the Vulcan was as ignorant as he in this area. Besides, it would be unfair to worry him now, when he so clearly had problems of his own.

No, it would have to be McCoy, Kirk decided. The doctor was discreet, sympathetic, had proved his friendship. An excellent psychologist, surely he would be able to suggest an answer?

With a tired sigh Kirk settled deeper into bed; tomorrow he would go and see Bones...

The following night it was McCoy's turn to lie awake, considering the

problems that had been presented to him during the course of that day.

Women sure did cause a whole heap of trouble, he reflected; here were Jim and Spock both worried sick because each, though for a different reason, was unable to respond as a normal male. Spock could not, and Jim would not, take an interest in women.

It might have seemed amusing to some men, but McCoy was sensitive enough to appreciate the danger. Spock must marry, yet his impotence would betray him if he did; Jim was attractive to women, but not attracted to them. And somehow he, Leonard McCoy, was expected to come up with a logical, acceptable reason why each should remain celibate. It was an impossible situation...or...was it?

Something he had read once... A devilish grin spread slowly across McCoy's face as the outrageous idea, born of his misplaced sense of humour, took root and began to grow. It could work...it was just crazy enough...and Jim and Spock, in all the universe, were the only two men who could make it work.

The longer he considered it, the more possible it seemed. McCoy rose hastily and consulted the library computer, checking what little information there was on the marriage laws of Vulcan.

Yes...he had remembered correctly - that was all right. Now the only thing that remained was to convince his friends that he had found the answer.

Before his nerve had a chance to fail he called Kirk and Spock, asking them to visit his quarters in the morning. Whatever happened, no word of this must leak out, and in sickbay there was always the chance of being overheard.

For a long time he sat awake, going over possible objections in his mind, and producing answers; then, satisfied, he returned to bed; and Leonard McCoy, the responsible, dedicated Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise, chuckled quietly to himself as he settled to sleep.

* * * * *

Outwardly composed, inwardly racked with nerves, Spock faced the assembled family council.

How did I allow myself to be talked into this? he wondered as he waited to speak. He could just see Jim, sitting to his right and slightly behind him; but he dared not catch the Human's eye. Jim too had been persuaded by McCoy's crazy argument, but now Spock wondered how they could hope to carry this through. Though no comment had been made there had already been startled looks when he had insisted that Kirk attend this meeting.

There was a stir of movement as Selek rose to address him, and he concentrated his attention - they were committed now.

"Spock, you have reached maturity, and are as yet unbonded. We, your family, are concerned for your safety, and as is our right we now demand that you select a bondmate; or if you are unable to choose, that you accept the wife we have chosen for you."

Spock rose to his feet; his voice was very calm. "I may still name my own mate?"

"You may. Provided that your choice is not forbidden under law, we will accept she whom you name."

"I have already stated that I do not wish to marry while I remain on active service, but you have chosen to invoke tradition to compel me. Therefore, so do I - a tradition older than the bonding ceremony itself. I select as my mate one who is permitted to me by our most ancient laws, and I will accept no substitute - my decision is made, and none may interfere or forbid."

"That is tradition," Selek agreed. "Your choice?"

"James Kirk."

Not all Vulcan control could restrain the gasps of astonishment; Kirk flushed crimson under the eyes turned to him, but lifted his head proudly.

"Impossible!" Seleok exclaimed at last. "A Human male... Impossible, Spock!"

"Not so. It is not forbidden to marry a Human - I myself am proof of that - and male bonding has been known and honoured since the dawn of time. You quote tradition to me - I merely follow it." Turning, he extended his hands. "James, do you accept me?"

Kirk rose and stepped forward to lay his hands in Spock's. "I accept," he said calmly.

The members of the council had been conferring urgently; at last Seleok turned back to Spock. "Your choice is indeed...permissible," he conceded reluctantly. "Since your life and sanity are our primary concern, we accept the Human James Kirk as your bondmate. The formal declaration will take place at noon tomorrow, before the proper witnesses - please make the necessary arrangements." Shifting his gaze to Kirk he continued with a touch of embarrassment, "I am compelled to ask...you consent freely to this? You are prepared to fulfil the duties of bondmate?"

Kirk lowered his eyes. "I am prepared," he said clearly.

"So be it. We meet at the appointed hour."

The journey home was accomplished in total silence. Spock could sense Sarek's curiosity and disapproval, T'Pol's hidden amusement, but neither would make any comment until they were safely indoors.

It was a pity, he reflected, that there had been no time to warn his parents of his decision, but the Enterprise had been delayed in transit - they had only just reached the council meeting in time - although the absence of Seleok, head of the council, as well, would have caused the meeting to be automatically postponed.

Kirk at least was serene, confident that when everything had been explained Sarek and T'Pol would understand.

As for the fifth member of the group - McCoy was having difficulty in restraining a grin of delight at the thought of the consternation Spock's announcement must have produced among these supposedly controlled Vulcans.

The air-car landed, and Sarek led the way to his study; once there he turned to his adopted son.

"Spock, I demand an explanation! You assured me that you had no interest in James, yet now..."

"Sarek," T'Pol interrupted gently, "I think we should allow Spock to explain - I am certain that we do not yet know the full story."

"Thank you, mother." Spock flashed a reproving glance at McCoy, who was now grinning openly. "It was McCoy's idea..."

"I suspected it might be," T'Pol murmured; she had a thoroughly unVulcan appreciation of the good doctor's sense of humour.

"Your explanation?" Sarek demanded impatiently.

"In my previous universe, as in this, such matters are not readily discussed, sir. However, in this case it is necessary to explain to you why we have agreed to this charade.

The primary consideration is to conceal my imposture; Jim will pay the price if I am discovered, and not even you can protect him. It will arouse suspicion if I remain unbonded, therefore it is necessary that I marry; yet that marriage would in itself arouse suspicion as I am incapable of fulfilling my obligations to

a wife. Somehow I had to find a mate who, knowing the truth, would be prepared to shield me - and who could be trusted with such a secret?" He hesitated, then continued. "Jim too is in difficulties; as a result of his...experiences, he has no desire for sexual contact; yet as a young, attractive and highly-placed officer, women - and men too, I fear - desire him. Marriage, to a mate who could be trusted to make no demands on him, would provide him with an acceptable excuse for refusing any propositions.

It was McCoy's suggestion that Jim and I should go through the bonding ceremony. So will Vulcan be satisfied, and Jim will have the protection that he needs."

"I see a difficulty," T'Pol said slowly. "Male bonding, although rare, is honoured on Vulcan, but not among Terrans. Surely James will be the subject of gossip and speculation when it becomes known that he is the legal consort of a male?"

"Not so. On the Enterprise it will not be known. All he need say is that he is married to a Vulcan. The identity of that Vulcan need not be disclosed."

"But the bonding ceremony triggers pon farr," Sarek protested. "I will not permit you to make use of James in such a fashion."

"Where I come from it does not; and as I have already explained, I am immune to the mating fever. We will not in fact form a full bond; we will merely link minds as we have several times done in the past."

"I promise you, I'll be perfectly safe with Spock," Kirk broke in shyly. "I'm grateful for your concern, but it is the best solution for us both. No-one will bother Spock, and if I owe him the fidelity due to a bondmate, I can easily reject any advances simply by telling the truth. You see, I lie so badly...but I could never betray Spock, even though the bonding is in name only."

"What of the future?" T'Pol asked with concern. "Jim, your reluctance to marry may pass - you may one day wish to take a wife. Yet if you are committed to Spock..."

"In that event I will of course release him from his vows to me, should he wish it," Spock said. "On the other hand, I have studied the marriage laws - in a male bonding either of the partners may, with the other's consent, take a female as secondary wife to ensure children - just as the male in a normal bonding may take a secondary wife, to ensure children, if his first wife is barren, even although he would not normally do so until his first wife was pregnant."

Sarek looked directly at Kirk. "You are certain that you consent to this willingly? There has been no coercion?"

"None, Sarek. It's what I want. But...thank you for being concerned."

"Thanks are unnecessary within the family; it is merely... I wish you well, James."

"I'm grateful. May I ask... Would you please call me 'Jim' when there are no strangers present? James was...was his name for me - it has...unpleasant associations."

"As you wish. T'Pol, I leave tomorrow's arrangements in your hands."

The sun had burned the morning freshness from the air as Kirk walked between T'Pol and McCoy to the bonding. As this was a private and personal ceremony, involving no question of inheritance between two powerful land-owning families, Spock had requested that it take place in the garden, rather than amid the forbidding grandeur of the ancestral Arena of Marriage. This had been granted, and only the essential witnesses and family representatives were present. Spock was attended by his parents, Selek was to conduct the ceremony, and as Kirk had no relatives of his own to stand with him, T'Pol had offered to act as his female

witness, her presence also signifying that Selek had accepted the match.

Kirk kept his eyes firmly on Spock as they came together to stand before Selek; the Vulcan glanced round the circle of faces, then began the ceremony at once.

"We are called to witness the bonding of Spock, son of Sarek, to James Kirk - let any who would dispute the choice speak now."

He paused; the only sound to break the silence was the rippling water of the fountain on the terrace.

"Make your vows, each to the other," Selek directed.

Spock turned to face Kirk, taking the Human's hands between his own. "I take you as my bondmate," he said clearly, "to be my honoured companion while life endures. I will care for you, keep you from want, and my protection will surround you. I pledge you my loyalty, my trust and my fidelity; your honour is mine, and any harm done to you I will avenge. I give my life into your hands, and I pledge that I will take no other without your consent."

He gripped Kirk's hands tightly for a moment, stilling their trembling, and waited for the Human's reply. Kirk took a deep breath, and grasped Spock's hands in turn.

"I take you..." Kirk's voice faltered for a moment, then he recovered and began again, speaking firmly and without hesitation. "I take you as my bondmate, to be my honoured companion while life endures. I will care for you, keep you from want, and my protection will surround you. I pledge you my loyalty, my trust and my fidelity; your honour is mine, and any harm done to you I will avenge. I give my life into your hands, and I pledge that I will take no other without your consent."

There was a moment's silence when he had finished, then Selek spoke again.

"Share this cup, in token that your lives are now one."

Spock took the goblet and held it to Kirk's lips, then drank as the Human held it in turn; he then placed it on the ground and set his foot firmly on the delicate crystal.

"That which is ours, is ours alone," he said, and Kirk echoed his words; together they trod on the goblet, crushing it to fragments.

"Link minds in the bonding meld," Selek directed, "that all may know your union is truly one of mind and spirit."

Kirk started nervously, remembering that this had been the Captain's intention, to use this ancient rite to bind him irrevocably; then flushed with shame even as the thought crossed his mind. He saw a flicker of hurt in Spock's eyes for a moment, and moved forward impulsively; hoping to atone, he took the Vulcan's hand and guided it to his face, meeting the dark eyes with serene confidence now.

The Vulcan moved closer, placing both hands precisely on Kirk's head; as the Human had no telepathic skills of his own Spock had to form the link for them both, but Kirk raised his own hands to the intent face, aware that the closer the contact the easier it was to link - and, a little, he wanted to demonstrate his own absolute trust.

Kirk became aware of Spock's presence at the threshold of his mind, and willingly lowered his defences, remembering with a rush of affection how scrupulously Spock kept the promise he had made. If he wished to initiate a meld he would signal his presence, but even when Kirk's mind was opened to him he would wait to be guided in; and he kept carefully to the exact purpose of the meld, his thoughts a tight, concentrated beam, never once allowing himself to study the Human's emotions and memories unless Kirk issued an invitation.

What should I do? Kirk asked.

Nothing, Jim. We need merely maintain the link for a few moments - no-one can tell what we are doing.

Spock...do you want...a full bonding meld?

For a moment he felt the temptation as Spock did, a longing to let their mental fusion become closer, deeper.

I think not, Jim. One day, perhaps...but for the moment we do not need it. A full meld would strip you of your defences against me, and I think it best that you become accustomed to the bond gradually. Even this curtailed ceremony will increase your sensitivity, and I do not wish you to be suddenly confronted with the permanent contact a full meld would produce until you have gained a little more experience.

If you think it best, Kirk conceded with a reluctance that surprised himself; and sensed in answer the other's gratitude for his trust.

They remained linked for some moments, enjoying the affection that flowed between them, then Spock slowly began to withdraw and they stood once more as separate entities. Kirk realised that Selek was speaking again.

"The bonding has been declared and witnessed according to tradition. I pronounce Spock and James Kirk bondmates for life. Infidelity by either will be punished by death, as a disgrace to our family. I remind all present - " and his eyes lingered meaningfully on Sendak, "that James Kirk is now considered Vulcan - his bondmate may avenge any insult to him with death. Spock, James Kirk... may you live long in unity."

The final words were echoed by the witnesses, and Kirk looked up at Spock proudly. It was curious, for he had always known that the Vulcan would never allow anything to harm him if he could prevent it, but now that he had been declared Spock's legal bondmate he felt a renewed sense of absolute security. Though their relationship could never extend into the physical he now owed Spock absolute fidelity, and that single fact would give him the confidence he needed to remain chaste - faced with the choice of hurting, say, Marlena Moreau, whom he knew to be in love with him, or of breaking his vows to Spock, there was in fact no choice.

As Spock turned to lead the way indoors he extended his hand and Kirk, remembering the custom, touched it with his own.

Remember, came the Vulcan's thought in warning, *I must now begin to display the irrationality expected of a newly-bonded male approaching pon farr. Do not be alarmed - I am in complete control.*

I know that, Spock, was Kirk's quietly confident reply.

While apparently listening with close attention to his uncle, Spock surveyed the crowded reception room, anxiously seeking the one Human present in this Vulcan gathering. A frown creased his forehead as he located Kirk in conversation with his cousin Sendak - judging by his expression Kirk was not enjoying the encounter.

Fortunately custom provided him with an excuse to intervene; Spock gave a low growl of annoyance, interrupting Selek in mid-sentence, and stalked across the room to place himself squarely between the two.

"Leave us!" he snapped, grasping Kirk's arm possessively, and Sendak, with a wary glance at his cousin's angry frown, stepped aside. Without releasing his grip Spock led Kirk aside; the Vulcans gave way before them, clearing a path as they stepped onto the terrace.

Once there Kirk slumped for a moment in relief, then as Spock released him he straightened and looked out over the desert. Spock gave him the respite, his memory travelling back over the events of the day.

All had gone well during the ceremony; Kirk had played his role to

perfection, appearing totally composed as he spoke his vows clearly under the scrutiny of the watching Vulcans, but Spock had been well aware of the momentary fear, the tension barely controlled. For that reason, when they had linked minds in the pretence of bonding he had kept the mind touch light, allowing Kirk to experience only the reassurance he needed so badly, even though he longed to accept Kirk's impulsive offer of the full bonding meld, the mental unity so vital to the Vulcan's telepathic mind and which he had only glimpsed as yet. But even those distant glimpses of full rapport were more than he could ever have known had he remained in his own universe, half suffocated by his grief.

It had seemed to work, for he had sensed Kirk's confidence returning, and as their minds parted Kirk had flashed him a brief, nervous smile; but during the return to the house the Human had been very quiet, had scarcely spoken a word. This had caused no comment, as it had been attributed to a natural apprehension at what awaited him - Vulcans knew only too well what pon farr could mean.

Unfortunately McCoy had been recalled to the ship as soon as the ceremony was over - the presence of another Human would have supported Kirk during the long formal gathering that followed. Spock sensed that Kirk was feeling rather lost among so many Vulcans...and Sendak - what had he been saying?

"What happened, Jim?" Spock asked quietly when Kirk turned to face him at last.

The Human laughed nervously. "I was trying not to let it show. Sendak... he was trying to scare me, I think. You said Vulcans didn't speak of pon farr, but he said...he hinted..." Kirk coloured. "He said I had to be...locked up with you...for the duration of pon farr, and that you would...would... He wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know, of course..."

"Jim." Spock laid his hands carefully on Kirk's shoulders. "Are you still so afraid that you cannot trust me completely, even yet? That is the custom, yes, and my rooms have been prepared, but they will not be used. I have made arrangements with McCoy... I know what memories such a time would have for you. Only play your part a little longer - you will be safe, I promise you."

"I knew that, really," Kirk said shamedly. "It's just... He scared me, made me remember... Have I hurt you, Spock?"

"No - I understand." Spock smiled affectionately at his companion, then added in a lighter tone, "Jim, come with me for a moment - I have a gift for you."

"A gift?"

Spock would not explain, and Kirk followed with curiosity as the Vulcan led the way to the study.

"First, I want to explain..." The Vulcan seemed hesitant. "I do not wish you to be troubled by what you will find when we next come home; but..."

"Whatever it is, tell me," Kirk urged, concerned at his friend's obvious unease.

"You know that Sarek often has visitors, colleagues from his days in the service, or relatives...and Vulcans are observant..."

"And it'll cause talk if your bondmate is known to be sleeping in the guest room. What you're trying to say is, I'll have to share your quarters, is that it?"

"Not the same room, Jim," Spock said anxiously. "You will be expected to use my quarters, yes...but you will have your own room..."

"Spock, don't be an idiot!" Kirk exclaimed, laughing. "Have you been worried about telling me that? If I can stand up before your family and speak the bonding vow, I'm not going to faint because you'll be sleeping next door!"

"It was foolish of me," Spock admitted wryly. "But I have a horror of reviving...unpleasant memories for you."

"Idiot!" Kirk repeated with an affectionate grin. "Now where's that gift you promised me?"

Spock went to the desk and produced a small box. "This is not a Vulcan custom, Jim, but it occurred to me that it might be easier for you to wear some recognised Human symbol of marriage, so I had this made for you,"

Kirk opened the box, and found it contained a heavy gold ring, inscribed with Vulcan characters.

"Humans will recognise the symbol of the wedding ring," Spock continued, "and Vulcans will assume that I indulge you in a Human custom. Will you accept it - as a gift from a friend?"

"Thank you, Spock." Kirk slid the ring onto the fourth finger of his left hand. "It's beautiful - and you're right, Humans will expect to see me wearing something of the sort. What do the characters mean?"

"Your name and mine in Vulcan script. It's the old form, which Humans would find almost impossible to read - and my people would never comment on such a personal possession."

Kirk studied the ring a moment longer, then he looked up, his eyes clouded. "I have no gift for you."

"Vulcans wear no outward symbol of marriage. But you did give me a gift, Jim; one more precious to me than gold."

"Did I?" Kirk frowned in puzzlement. "What was it?"

Spock laid his hands on the Human's shoulders. "When you spoke the bonding vow to me today you gave me everything - your life and your trust. Do you realise that as my bondmate you have no defence against me now?"

"Defence? Against you?" Kirk smiled. "What defence do I need? ~~None~~ that I can see. But...with you, I'm safe from anyone else. Spock..." He stepped forward, reaching out to the Vulcan, and Spock held him in a gentle, comforting embrace, understanding that Kirk was only now realising fully the protection that surrounded him. There was nothing sexual in that embrace, expressing as it did the trust and love between devoted brothers; and Spock smiled as he held the Human reassuringly, aware that Kirk's affectionate nature, so long starved of any expression, was luxuriating in the new freedom to feel, and in the ability to express that feeling without any risk of misunderstanding.

For Spock too there was a sense of perfect completeness in this quiet moment of trust as a long-neglected place in his own life was filled at last. Since the first Kirk's death he had been very much alone, for even though in the other universe McCoy and Scott had been valued friends, the dictates of his upbringing had made it impossible for him to show them openly how much he valued their companionship. Even with Kirk... Even with him there had been an element of restraint, so that often he had been unable to give the verbal comfort, the reassuring touch, the Human would have welcomed, although he had sometimes managed to do so. The long years of loneliness had taught him now little his pride was worth; and here, as he had learned, Vulcans seemed to be permitted to indicate their feelings, though they were still expected to control them.

Never again, Spock vowed silently as he stepped back and lifted Kirk's head, never again will I permit my sterile Vulcan training to hurt this man by denying him the certain knowledge of how much I care for him. His voice was light, however, when he said, "Come, Jim - we should rejoin the others now."

"Did I... Was anyone suspicious when you took me away from Sendak?"

"No, I covered well. When I led you away I exhibited the possessiveness expected of a male approaching pon farr. Jim...remain close to my side, and do not be alarmed if I act strangely - remember, I must deceive all but Sarek and T'Pol. Do not argue with me, and above all, obey at once any order I give you."

"I will, Spock." Kirk smiled up, his eyes glowing. "I seem to have said that rather often today. But what I didn't say was...I trust you."

There was nothing to startle him in what followed, however. He remained at the Vulcan's side, taking little part in the conversation, but acutely aware of the curious glances cast at him. Spock, once more in consultation with his uncle, occasionally rested his hand on Kirk's shoulder, and often sought the Human's face with his eyes. When food was served he refused to eat, but commanded Kirk to do so, himself filling his plate. He did sip at a glass of wine, however, then held it to Kirk's lips, bidding him finish the drink.

This exchange brought a sneer from Sendak, which in turn caused Spock to round on him, snarling defiance. For a moment the situation looked unpleasant, then Selek pulled his son away with a whisper of reproof, and Sarek stepped forward, gesturing for silence.

"My friends," he said, beckoning Kirk and Spock to his side, "today we have witnessed the bonding of my only son. It was my wish to bid James Kirk a fitting welcome to our family. Spock's wife would have been my daughter; I therefore call you all to witness that I accept James as my younger son in his own right, and name him my heir with Spock in equal partnership."

Kirk gave a faint gasp of astonishment, and managed to stammer, "I am honoured, Sarek. May I prove worthy."

"I am certain that you are, for my son has chosen you," the older Vulcan replied gravely.

"Welcome, my son." T'Pau moved forward to greet Kirk, and the Human smiled shyly.

"Thank you...mother."

For a moment Kirk had to blink back threatening tears. His own mother was a distant, beloved memory, clouded by the mystery of her disappearance; in the Vulcan woman he sensed a deep affection to which he longed to respond.

T'Pau smiled at him, aware of what was going through his mind. She had been denied a child of her own, and had found no comfort in Amanda's son, although his older counterpart from another universe had given her a quiet, courteous affection that she appreciated; now, in this gentle, affectionate young Human she had found an outlet for her love, and she hoped that she could help to atone for his suffering.

A wordless message of affection passed between them, then as T'Pau stepped back Kirk met Sendak's eyes across the room; the sheer malevolence in that gaze made him shudder and move closer to Spock, who automatically placed a protective hand on his shoulder. The contact opened the mind link between them, and Spock's anxious thought came clearly.

Jim, what has frightened you?

Spock, it's Sendak...he hates me.

He has reason, Jim. If I had died unbonded he would have been Sarek's heir, and would have shared with me if Sarek had died first. As my bondmate, and as Sarek's younger son, you have displaced him.

So even here, I am hated. Sadness coloured Kirk's mind.

You are also greatly loved, Jim. Do you not understand what Sarek has done?

At Kirk's negative thought Spock continued. *Our bonding did not make you safe from Vulcan law should the truth ever become known, for your membership of the family was dependent on your being the bondmate of Sarek's son; but that Spock is dead. By formally declaring you as his younger son he has made you a member of the clan in your own right. Now only he has the right to demand vengeance, for you killed your brother - your offence is against the family, not the clan.*

I see the difference. It was...kind of Sarek, to think of that.

He is fond of you, Jim; and I know that T'Pol has thought of you as a son since our last visit.

Yes; she...

Kirk's thought was broken by the insistent beep of Spock's communicator; he answered it, to hear Uhura's voice.

"Captain, a Priority One signal coming in from Starfleet Command; can you come on board, sir?"

"At once, Lieutenant. Notify the transporter room - two to beam up." Turning to Sarek, Spock said clearly, "Will you excuse us, father? Duty demands my presence."

"Of course - " Sarek began, but was interrupted by Spock.

"This is against all custom, Spock! What of pon farr? You cannot leave at this time - the danger..."

"Proper arrangements will be made on the Enterprise," Spock replied coldly. "My bondmate is aware of his duty. James, attend me."

Kirk touched his fingers to Spock's as he moved to his side; the Vulcan raised the communicator and said, "Energize!"

With profound relief the Human saw the brilliant scene fade around him, carrying the memory of T'Pol's affectionate, encouraging glance as the transporter beam took them.

On board the Enterprise McCoy started forward as the two men materialised; he managed to contain himself until Kyle left at Spock's dismissal, then said,

"Uhura relayed the message on time, then."

"Yes, Doctor. A timely diversion."

"I thought that was the one thing Vulcans couldn't argue with," McCoy grinned. "Uhura thought it was a bit odd, but I told her it was a polite excuse to make sure you got some rest without offending your family, and she co-operated gladly. Your crew think a lot of you, Spock."

"I am grateful - to you, and to Miss Uhura."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense now - how did it go? Any trouble?"

"All is well. The bonding is legally registered, and no-one suspects that the ceremony was a sham. Jim - " His voice deepened, softened to the tone of gentleness he only used to his friend, " - go now with McCoy, and rest. I will take the watch - the ceremony has been a strain on you, and you slept little last night."

"How did you know...?" Kirk broke off the question, aware suddenly of how little Spock missed where he was concerned. "Yes, I'll go - I am tired. Bones, I must tell you what Sarek did..."

He delayed further explanations, however, until the door of his quarters closed safely behind them; McCoy listened attentively as Kirk prepared for bed.

"Make sure your hair's dry," he warned from sheer habit as Kirk emerged from the shower. "Don't want you catching a chill now. So you're safe then, even if the Captain's death is discovered - as Sarek's son your punishment is in his hands only."

"Yes - that's why he did it, so that he could protect me," Kirk agreed as he climbed into bed. "Hey, what's this?" he added suspiciously as McCoy handed him a capsule and a glass of water.

"Just something to help you sleep - Spock insisted."

"But he didn't say... Oh, you can do it too!"

"Do what?"

"Talk to Spock with your eyes. He told me - he couldn't mindlink in the other universe, but he and McCoy could understand each other with a look, especially where Jim Kirk was concerned."

"I never noticed before, but you're right," McCoy said in surprise. "I knew just what he was thinking."

"I'm glad you got on so well with him, Bones," Kirk confided as he handed back the glass and settled down. "He deserves friends, but after the other Kirk's death he was badly hurt... He's been...terribly lonely."

"Poor devil." McCoy was silent for a moment, then asked curiously, "Don't you find it difficult sometimes, Jim? He's so like the Captain."

"Not to me," Kirk said slowly. "It's hard to explain...but Spock's eyes are so gentle... No, I could never confuse them."

McCoy grinned and left silently, seeing that Kirk was already asleep.

Kirk was wakened some hours later by the persistent buzzing of his intercom; he answered it, to hear Spock's voice.

"May I come in, Jim? I must speak to you."

"Of course. Ten minutes?"

As he dressed Kirk reflected on Spock's sensitivity; though he knew he would be welcome the Vulcan never entered his quarters without permission, even pausing on the threshold when the door opened for him, as he did exactly ten minutes later.

"What is it, Spock?"

"Don't forget that you must confine yourself to your quarters for the next three days. Selek and T'Kara will be coming on board soon."

"And it wouldn't do for your bondmate to be seen on duty when you're supposed to be in pon farr," Kirk chuckled.

"Exactly. As it is I will have to find reasons to vanish from time to time. It is fortunate that here the mating fever is not so extreme; in the other universe it is less frequent, but..." He shuddered, then continued. "There is one more thing - since I am capable of functioning I must ask Selek and T'Kara to dine in my quarters tonight. Do you feel that you could attend, Jim? It will be expected, but I can make your excuses if you would prefer..."

"Listen, Spock." Kirk's grin faded as he came closer and laid his hands on the Vulcan's shoulders. "I know that in front of other Vulcans you'll sometimes have to treat me as if we were truly bonded. Just tell me what you want me to do."

"Thank you, Jim," Spock said quietly.

The dinner that night was spectacularly successful. Kirk, only too grateful that the unpleasant Sendak was not on this occasion travelling with his parents, took only a brief part in the conversation, bearing himself with a shy dignity that confirmed the Vulcan couple's approval of him.

McCoy, who had been invited to ease the situation for Kirk, excused himself soon after the meal; Spock waited for a short time then, aware that his uncle was watching, gestured Kirk to the sleeping quarters.

Even though it was by prior arrangement the Human could not hold back the colour that flooded his cheeks. "If you will excuse me, I will retire," he murmured.

Selek and T'Kara exchanged approving glances; really, despite his being Human, Kirk was proving to be a co-operative bondmate, fully understanding the need to submit obediently during this time.

Though normally etiquette prescribed that the older couple end the evening, in Spock's supposed condition the hint could not be ignored. Selek waited for a few moment, seeming to disregard Kirk's withdrawal and the implied reason for it, then he rose.

"I am somewhat fatigued, and will retire," he announced. "I wish you well, nephew."

Spock ushered his guests out and returned to join Kirk. McCoy, rejoining them some time later, gave a rich chuckle as he entered and studied the two intent faces - he had found them deeply engrossed over a chessboard.

"No romance left in the world!" he sighed dramatically. "You two must be the first bonded pair in all Vulcan history to spend your honeymoon playing chess."

"Vulcan has no moon," Spock pointed out in mild reproof.

"You know, Spock - I'm not surprised."

* * * * *

McCOY'S LOG

So we pulled it off, the three of us - surely the strangest bonding in all Vulcan history. For in its own way it is a bonding, I'm sure of that...not in the physical sense, perhaps, but in the mental and emotional completeness Jim and Spock have found together.

I'm glad to be the one who found the means to secure their safety, for despite all their reassurances I cannot rid myself of the feeling of guilt that shames me each time I remember how long Jim endured, alone and uncomfortable.

And I call myself a doctor! Sometimes I think I know less than the rawest medical school student. I saw him every day, treated his injuries so often... and never once suspected that they had been deliberately inflicted. Spock has suggested that the Captain used his powers to cloud my mind, lull me into believing his explanations, but I count that as no excuse. Jim may forgive my blindness - I know I never will.

Of course, I knew all the answers, once my nose had been well and truly rubbed in the truth! 'Find yourself a girl, Jim,' I parroted. 'Have some fun - you'll soon forget.'

Forget? God, he was terrified! And if I could've handpicked a walking disaster for him, Karen Gallard would have been it. Mind you, I feel sorry for her in a way, but for Jim it was the Captain's attitude all over again...she wanted him, and to hell with what he wanted.

I finally woke up when he came to me, asking my advice. Oh sure, I knew there had been some talk among the crew, but I honestly believed that when it came to the pinch his natural intuition would take over and show him how to cope, how to give a neat brush-off; in fact, he was as innocent as a child. And intuition sometimes has to be helped along by experience.

It was Spock who started me really thinking, though, when he told me of Selek's ultimatum. I thought, 'Really, they only have absolute trust in each other...pity Spock can't bond with Jim.' Then I realised that, according to something I'd come across once, male bonding had been legal on Vulcan in the

past - if it still was... So I checked, and it was; they could bond.

Sure, they put up a few objections at first, but nothing I couldn't persuade them out of. Jim says Selek's face was a study when Spock made his announcement.

If I had any doubts about the wisdom of my advice they were dispelled when I rejoined them tonight after Selek had left. There they were, engrossed as usual over that damned chessboard. It may not have been a very romantic way to spend a wedding night, but it seems to me that there was more honest-to-god love in that room than I've ever sensed before, anywhere.

I walked Jim back to his quarters to arrange how I was going to get food to him - he'll have to stay in seclusion until Spock's supposed pon farr is dispelled - and as I said goodnight to him I studied him carefully.

He stood there, laughing over the argument I'd just had with Spock, turning that ring on his finger as though it was a talisman - for him, perhaps it is - and his eyes were utterly serene.

If Spock hadn't come to us... But I can't bear to dwell on that. He came, and Jim is safe and happy - nothing else matters.

Blasted headaches! They've been getting worse recently...must be overwork. I'm sure that's why my eyes are stinging. Guess I'll turn in now... Funny, I never could think of the Enterprise as 'home' before...

PART 3: MITCHELL

"Gary!"

Lt. Gary Mitchell, assistant navigator newly assigned to the U.S.S. Enterprise, swung round in blank astonishment. A youthful Commander, who could only have been the ship's First Officer, was grinning cheerfully at him.

For a moment Mitchell could only stare, desperately trying to remember where he had met his senior officer before - for meet him he must have done, and even known him well enough for the man to address him by his given name. Then recognition dawned.

"Jim! Jim Kirk!"

Kirk's grin broadened as he caught the hand of his one friend from the Academy. "How are you, Gary? It's been a long time."

"Yes... I hardly recognised you." It was not quite the truth; nobody had been further from his thoughts than the young and hero-worshipping Kirk, so pleased at being noticed by an older student. Mitchell, an intelligent but uninspired student, had been flattered by the younger man's admiration and had given him a casual friendship. Kirk was useful when Mitchell's ego, battered as it so often was by his lecturers' and tutors' well-deserved disapproval, required reassurance and boosting; but the feeling had never gone deep, and when he left the Academy Mitchell had immediately forgotten Kirk's existence almost completely.

He had carved out for himself a career in Starfleet as uninspired as his Academy one. Promoted to Lieutenant on seniority rather than accomplishment, he was unlikely to advance any further, and he knew it.

Now he experienced a moment of sheer jealousy as he realised that the younger man he had befriended so patronisingly was not just one rank above him but two, forgetting that it was his own laziness more than anything else that kept him in his present lowly position. He had the intelligence - but although reasonably ambitious he lacked the drive to use that intelligence.

"Nice to have you aboard, Gary," Kirk was saying cheerfully. "I think you'll like it here. "We have the best Captain in the Fleet..."

The rest of Kirk's sentence was lost as Mitchell, with gloomy foreboding, remembered that the Enterprise was captained by a Vulcan. No, he would not like it here; although he had learned over the years to appear busy and conscientious when he was actually doing nothing, he doubted that a Vulcan would be fooled.

He realised that Kirk had stopped talking and pulled his attention back hastily, searching for something to say; something safe to say. "I can hardly believe it," he managed. "You've come on fast, Jim."

"I've been lucky," Kirk said mendaciously, remembering numerous occasions when he had done assignments for the older student. At the time he had believed Mitchell's usual plea of 'too much work' - now he was less sure. True, many good crewmen never rose beyond Lieutenant. "I was in the right place at the right time, did the right thing..."

He was interrupted by a yeoman. "Excuse me, sir."

"Yes, Yeoman?" Mitchell noticed that the younger man - always shy with girls - still appeared to be unaffected by female beauty; the girl in question was a real stunner, but to Kirk she was clearly a mere extension of the clipboard she carried.

"There seems to be a discrepancy in the supplies we've taken aboard for the Benecia colony, sir."

"I'll come and see to it. See you later, Gary."

Mitchell gazed after Kirk's retreating back. No, he thought again. He was not going to like it here.

"How do you think the new crew members are shaping up, Jim?" They were five days out from Starbase 8 - an easy, routine five days.

Kirk frowned slightly. "Mostly, quite well," he said. "Half of them lack experience, of course, but that's easily remedied - by the time we reach Benecia they'll have tightened up, learned the difference between training and active service. But..."

"But...?" Spock paused, hand raised to lift a bishop, as Kirk hesitated.

"I hate having to say this, Spock, but I'm afraid we may have picked up one piece of dead wood."

"Five days is hardly time to judge a man quite so harshly," Spock suggested mildly, making his move.

"It's not five days, Spock. I knew him at the Academy. He hasn't changed."

"Mitchell?" It had to be.

"Yes. I quite like the man - we were fairly friendly at the Academy. He was ahead of me - I thought it great to have a senior student for a friend - and he used that to get me to do things for him. Now I can see that he just won't apply himself wholeheartedly."

"Does he know his work?"

"Yes. He wouldn't have lasted in Starship service if he was totally incompetent. You know that. Spock..."

"Yes, Jim?"

"You've noticed him too, haven't you?"

"Well...not really. In the other universe Mitchell was not trustworthy. But it does not follow that he would be so in every universe. We know that variations in character development do exist..."

"But almost always the main characteristics are similar."

"The word is 'almost', Jim. The Captain had few of the characteristics of virtually every other Spock I found."

"We know why," Kirk said. "He might have had them only they got smothered. But I'm glad, now, that they did, although I can feel sorry for him...because it means that I have you, now." He smiled at the Vulcan; Spock permitted himself an answering smile.

"How do you feel about Mitchell now?" Spock asked after a moment.

Kirk studied the board in silence for some seconds. "I'm not sure. I feel I owe him a debt... There was another senior, Finnegan; he was a bully, he picked on all the juniors, but for some reason I was his favourite victim. None of the instructors suspected anything, and none of us had the courage to inform on him without proof - and he was too clever to do anything that would provide us with proof. One time he went too far - I could have been in serious trouble, but Gary found out about it and reported him. Finnegan was expelled, and I was cleared. I suppose after that I did hero-worship Gary...and he was popular, good company... He made me feel...less lonely, sometimes." He moved a pawn.

Spock considered the move then looked sharply at Kirk, who gazed guilelessly back. As the Vulcan's attention returned to the board Kirk went on. "He still thinks of me as the credulous youngster, so proud of being singled out by an upper classman. I doubt if he ever cared that much for me; I was really just an ego-booster for him."

"You're not bitter about it," Spock commented.

"No, I'm not bitter. Sure, I was a fool, but I'm not bitter. I might have been if I'd realised at the time that I was just useful to him...or if he'd promised to keep in touch and hadn't. He made me no promises when he left... and he did give me something - I was grateful for that. No, I didn't realise he'd just used me until I began to compare him - my memory of him - with you, and realised how selfish he really was."

Spock took Kirk's pawn, noticed the half smile the Human couldn't quite control, and said, "That was a mistake."

Kirk's smile broadened. "Mate in three."

Spock returned his attention to the board, studied it carefully, then nodded. "Conceded. Well played, Jim."

"Have we time to begin another?"

"I think so."

They began to set the board in readiness for the next game. Kirk said abruptly, "I don't think Gary realises yet that I'm on to him. I haven't pushed him - yet - he's not slow enough to warrant a reprimand...but..."

"He soon will be?"

"I think not. Like I said, Spock, Gary Mitchell is lazy. To be caught out as unsatisfactory... A reprimand from the First Officer automatically brings him to the notice of the Captain, who could easily decide to set him extra duties. No - I would say he's learned - probably the hard way - just how much he's likely to get away with, and brought it to a fine art."

"Have you checked the report from his last ship?"

"The Kongo. Captain H'Ras called him 'a mediocre crewman who would do better to pay more attention to his duty and less to his own interests'."

"And you concur?"

Kirk hesitated. "On the basis of his present performance, not entirely. 'Mediocre' seems rather a harsh description; 'uninspired' might be more accurate."

"Or 'uninterested'?"

Kirk gave a half shrug. "Oh, Gary's main interest was always Gary Mitchell - in that at least Captain H'Ras was right. But he could be surprisingly good at something if it caught his attention. That could be it, I suppose. Given a Captain who was able to arouse interest in his work, Gary would probably be damned good."

"Jim, if the man has no pride in his work, it would be very difficult to arouse such an interest."

"I know." Kirk sighed, and moved his queen's pawn.

Gary Mitchell lay on his bed moodily scanning a book-tape, wishing he knew just what was going on in Jim Kirk's mind.

He had no particular desire to resume his friendship with the younger man - he had never really liked Kirk much, merely found him useful; if anything, he slightly despised Kirk for being so gullible. But Kirk might be useful again now...and if he thought that possible, Mitchell would make the effort to insinuate himself into Kirk's good books. But would it be useful? Mitchell was no fool; he knew that Kirk would not have risen so quickly to his present position even if he was 'in the right place at the right time' had he been a poor judge of character; but he thought he had successfully persuaded Kirk that he was a reliable, if slightly slow, worker. That meant that in emergencies he would be assigned as backup navigator to someone faster; an ideal situation for a lazy man.

Yet it might be difficult to resume that long-forgotten friendship should he choose to do so - Kirk was no longer the shy, withdrawn youth glad of a more extrovert companion, grateful for the careless defence Mitchell had provided against Finnegan's bullying, but a grown man, one on friendly terms with all of the senior officers, even the Vulcan captain. An inordinate amount of his free time was spent with the Captain, and Mitchell wondered if Kirk, who had needed a more forceful companion while he was at the Academy, had merely transferred that need to his Captain, though he found it difficult to understand a Vulcan tolerating such dependence.

Finally Mitchell decided to leave matters as they were - at least for the moment. It might be in his own best interests not to appear to be taking advantage of the situation that had existed all those years ago.

* * * * *

Time passed. The Benecia colony came and went, and the Enterprise moved on towards uncharted space.

It was the type of mission that Kirk most enjoyed, and Spock too found surprisingly relaxing. They were well away from both Klingon and Romulan space; there was no likelihood of a chance encounter with the declared enmity of the one, or the doubtful allegiance of the other. Not that the Romulans had given Spock any reason to doubt the sincerity of their alliance with the Federation; but the Vulcan well remembered the warlike nature of the Romulans in the universe he had left. They might indeed meet an enemy in this unexplored space - but for the moment at least he could relax, knowing that the ever-present danger to Kirk's life appeared to have withdrawn a little, and knowing too the pleasure Kirk found in studying the solar systems they encountered.

Since Kirk was fully occupied in his capacity as Science Officer, Spock quietly assumed most of his duties as First Officer. Where before Spock had frequently left Kirk in command during their joint watches, retiring to his cabin to work at the sometimes interminable paperwork that was a Captain's lot, he now did this in his off-duty hours, remaining at the con during his watch. Kirk too filled many of his off-duty hours compiling reports, and the two saw much less of each other than they would have liked; but no matter how extended

the day they made some time at the end of it to exchange a few words.

Mitchell, because of his fear of the Captain's powers of observation, found himself working harder than he had ever done in his life, and he did not like it. It didn't help his frame of mind either that the girl in the Science lab he was currently dating was being kept fully occupied in recording Kirk's observations and conclusions, so that she had to cancel a number of prearranged meetings.

The disgruntled navigator sat in the rec room not watching the film on the screen after Elizabeth had broken a date for the sixth time, amusing himself by wondering how he could get back at the Captain for making him work so hard and at Kirk for costing him his date.

A Human rival he could have understood, fought back against, but not a conscientiousness that took Dehner back to work even in her off-duty hours. A suspicion that she was secretly in love with the First Officer and hoped to attract his attention through her application to her work had at first angered him further, for he knew that Kirk was not interested in her. He could not combat a man who was not trying to take his girl away. But on one of the few occasions recently when he had spoken to Elizabeth she had commented sympathetically on Marlana Moreau's unrequited affection for the First Officer. "I don't know what she sees in him," Dehner had said. "He's nice, and I like him, I like working under him, but he's not my type. Besides, he's already married."

"Married?" Mitchell asked.

"Last time we were at Vulcan. Nobody known anything about her except that she's a member of the Captain's family. Kirk spends all his leaves there - that's how he must have got to know her. It explains why he never bothered with any of the girls on the ship, too - we used to wonder, sometimes. Nobody takes the rules that seriously."

Married. Reluctantly Mitchell set aside his suspicions, understanding at last the significance of the Vulcan-style ring Kirk seemed to wear constantly. Even if he was minded to sow any wild oats, Vulcans regarded fidelity as being very important - the Captain would certainly not like it if Kirk betrayed the trust of his sister, or cousin, or whatever she was.

Things might be better soon, though, Mitchell thought hopefully - they were due to leave orbit tomorrow, and the next solar system was the last in this immediate area. After surveying it they would head back into Federation space - at least for a while.

* * * * *

There was one Class M planet in the system, although it barely scraped into the classification. It was a world of much water and few land masses, on which a jumble of vegetation struggled for life. Rain - constant, torrential rain - seemed to be the climatic norm; the temperature of 38° Celsius created a humidity desperately uncomfortable for Humans and almost impossible for Vulcans. Its magnetic field was at the upper limit for the type, interfering badly with the sensors.

After struggling for some time to come up with less generalised and more detailed information, Kirk left the library computer sensors and crossed to Spock.

"We'll have to do this the hard way, Captain," he reported. "The sensors are being too badly disrupted by the magnetic field to be more than 25% effective. I would suspect that the transporter will be inoperative too."

"Communications?"

"The landing parties will be out of touch with the ship while they are on the surface, so I think we'd be best to operate from the ship rather than camp

down there. It will also be more comfortable - it appears to be the rainy season down there."

"Agreed. How many landing parties do you consider necessary?"

"I'll take one; Moreau will take another - it's time she got more experience anyway; Dave Carstairs could take a third. I'd rather leave Roderiguez in charge of the labs here - he's a good man in the lab, but a bit unsatisfactory in the field, tends to get over-involved with just one thing. Makes him good on basic lab research, of course, but in field work he's liable to miss seeing an elephant because he's so busy watching a single ant on an anthill. There's no-one else senior enough to lead. Three landing parties. If we each go to a different land mass we should cover the ground pretty quickly."

"Good. Do the sensors detect any animal life?"

"No," Kirk replied. "Only plant. But of course, with only 25% efficiency, I can't be positive."

Spock nodded. "Be careful, Jim."

Kirk assigned the three junior navigators to pilot the three shuttlecraft. He sent Stiles with Carstairs, Rahada with Moreau, and took the third - Mitchell - himself. Not that he particularly wanted his Academy friend with him - but he knew he couldn't trust Mitchell not to play up either of the others. He wondered whether or not to assign Dehner to one of the other groups, but the girl had become invaluable; her conscientiousness and willingness to learn were refreshing, and she would soon warrant promotion to a more responsible position. In addition, she had made no overt moves to attract her superior's attention and interest - Kirk fully approved of her. He knew that she was Mitchell's latest conquest, and devoutly hoped that she wouldn't be too badly hurt when she realised that her boyfriend had feet of very friable clay.

It was for this reason that he hesitated to include her in his own party. He had no fears that Dehner would be distracted by Mitchell; he was less certain that Mitchell would not be distracted by Dehner. Then Kirk decided that she was too valuable to him to assign elsewhere. He could only hope that the desire to impress her would keep Mitchell on his toes.

Mitchell received the news of his assignment with disgruntled resignation. At least he would be able to put his feet up while the scientists got wet, he thought, realising that with only three junior navigators on the ship he could not hope to escape the duty. There was no way that Lt. Chekov, the senior navigator, would go on such a mission, leaving the newest junior on board. Pity. Mitchell detested the senior navigator with an intensity that owed its existence to pure jealousy. It was bad enough that Jim Kirk, who had been a year behind him at the Academy, should be First Officer, but at least Jim could be called his contemporary; Chekov was at least ten years younger! Ten years, yet he was the senior! Mitchell was completely unable to recognise that this was wholly his own fault.

At least he would be in the same shuttle as Elizabeth - surely he would be able to leave the little craft on automatic pilot for a time while he spoke to her!

He was not.

Almost as soon as it left the Enterprise the shuttlecraft was affected by turbulence, mild at first but a clear prophesy of what was to come. Muttering silent curses Mitchell kept the Columbus on manual, compensating for the increased buffetting almost instinctively - he was in fact an extremely skilled pilot. Kirk made a mental note, aware that such a comment on a report such as Mitchell's was in its own way as damning as a wholly unsatisfactory one, but also

aware that Mitchell's skill deserved official mention.

The Columbus dropped into the dull obscurity of the clouds. Moisture gathered on the ports, further cutting the limited view, which showed only grey fog. Mitchell was flying wholly by instinct now as the turbulence and static electricity buildup in the cloud interfered with instrument readings.

Kirk sat in the co-pilot's seat, feeling completely helpless... There was nothing he could do that would not interfere with Mitchell's piloting. Behind him he was aware of tension, but it was controlled tension. Fortunately none of the scientists in the party knew of Gary's basic laziness; there was little danger of a panic. And at least Kirk could be certain that the navigator would leave nothing to chance when his own life depended on his efficiency.

Lightning sparked and threw the shuttle sideways. Mitchell wrestled her straight again.

"Do conditions warrant going on, Gary?" Kirk asked quietly.

Mitchell hesitated. There was nothing he wanted less than to go on; nothing he wanted more than to go back. But...there was Elizabeth Dehner, whom he was trying to impress. Her presence made him consider the question dispassionately. What if the other shuttles went on, leaving him the only one who decided to return?

"I can manage, Jim."

Kirk grinned. "Fine." Yes, he thought. You could be really good, Gary. Pity you're so damned lazy!

The Columbus bucked and tossed, a plaything for the wind. Then with an abruptness that startled them they were out of the wind, dropping lower into calm air. Calm - but rain battered noisily on the roof and sides in a steady drumming. The cloud was thinner here; visibility was still poor, but improving.

Lightning sparked again, leaping from the greyness above to hit the metal of the shuttle. She jolted violently. Mitchell fought her steady again.

"She'll be carrying quite a charge of electricity, sir," he said, making it an official report.

"Landing will earth her," Kirk replied confidently.

The Columbus dropped lower, out of the cloud. Below her a grey sea moved restlessly, white-topped waves rolling steadily before the wind which picked up again a few hundred feet above the surface. Mitchell held the Columbus steady just above the air current causing the wind. Kirk peered at the sensor, trying to establish the position of the nearest island.

"Fifty eight degrees mark three, Mr. Mitchell."

"Aye, sir." The Columbus swung on to her new course.

At last a small island appeared, taking shape through the reduced visibility of a sudden heavier batter of rain. It had the appearance of a volcanic atoll, cone-shaped, rising straight from the surging waves that beat white against it.

They circled it, flying as low as Kirk dared direct Mitchell to go. Vegetation climbed up the steep sides, low bushy growth with glossy leaves in a variety of yellowish to reddish browns.

Kirk studied the sensors. "No animal life detectable," he said. "Mr. Mitchell, if you can find a suitable landing site, set her down."

"Aye, sir."

They circled the island twice more, before finding a suitably flat peice of ground. Just above sea level, it had obviously been flattened by wave action on hot lava; even now spray lashed it, adding its quota of moisture to the already saturated air.

Kirk glanced round his party. "I'm afraid we're all going to get pretty wet," he said ruefully. "However, we shouldn't take too long. Remain in pairs - Miss Dehner, stay with me. Report back here in an hour. Gary - stay with the shuttle. If it looks like there's any danger to it, take off - just remember to be back here an hour from now."

"Right, Jim." Really, even although he didn't want to resume that long-ago friendship, there was a certain satisfaction in being able to call the First Officer by his given name occasionally.

Mitchell watched them leave. Davis and Oks disappeared almost immediately behind some rocks; the remaining four were in sight for some time, then they also moved further away and were gone.

The navigator sat back, half his mind on conditions outside, the other half pleasantly occupied with his favourite daydream. Admiral Mitchell, recognised for his brilliance, with nothing to do but give orders...with all of Starfleet alert to obey his slightest word. He was about to make the brilliant decision that would finally seal the Federation-Klingon treaty when his train of thought was abruptly shattered by a scraping noise against the hull of the Columbus. The rattle of the persistent rain had become so familiar that it could be ignored; this sound was now, loud enough to penetrate Mitchell's preoccupation, and somehow menacing.

Curious, Mitchell made for the door. He was not alarmed - after all, there was no animal life here, according to the sensors, so the sound could only have been made by wind-blown vegetation, even grit, he supposed vaguely as the sound repeated itself on the other side of the small craft. Damn. That meant he would have to leave the dry shelter of the Columbus if he was to discover what it was.

At the door he paused, laziness and self-indulgence warring with a feeble sense of duty. Then he sighed, resigning himself to getting wet, and opened the door.

The survey was going surprisingly well considering the unpleasantly wet conditions. The supposedly waterproof overgarments they had picked up from stores did help, but the driving rain found its damp way through fastenings and trickled topidly and inexorably down necks, despite the hoods, wetting the shirts beneath. But at least they were merely damp, not soaking.

It was fortunate too that the tricorders were made of plastic, not metal; even so they would have to be thoroughly dried afterwards.

The vegetation was all of a seaweedy type, clinging to metamorphic rock with sturdy, fibrous holdfasts. Erosion had not yet had much effect on the solid basalt; the only small rocks on the surface were volcanic bombs. Here and there were pockets of volcanic ash turned into pools of soft mud by the continuous rain; most of the ash had clearly been washed into the sea long since. Given time - several million years - this island might erode into something earth-covered and fertile, but until the millenia-long downpour ended everything loose would be washed down into the sea.

The seaweedy fronds struggled for existence, fighting for the best position in the light. Raindrops ran down the glossy surface of the huge 'leaves'. The members of the landing party tripped and stumbled as they made their slippery way round the small island. Here and there they paused to phaser sample pieces of rock from the bedrock, pluck a new plant.

Kirk was pretty sure that they would find nothing of value to the Federation on this planet; the preliminary investigation seemed to indicate that the only rock on the surface owed its existence to volcanic eruptions and lava flows.

Both he and Dehner were weighed down with rock samples as they made their

way back towards the shuttlecraft. The lighter load of plant samples went almost unnoticed.

As they came in sight of the shuttlecraft Kirk stopped in surprise. Dehner gasped.

The ledge on which the shuttlecraft still stood was awash with water. Kirk's lips tightened in a sharp anger. What had Mitchell been doing not to realise what was happening? He should have lifted off before this. Even if the scientists had to wait until the next low tide before the Columbus could return for them, at worst it would have meant a wet, uncomfortable few hours. If the incoming tide, driven before the relentless wind, damaged or - worse - destroyed the Columbus the landing party would be trapped for days while the Enterprise searched for them with inadequate sensors and no knowledge of just where they had gone.

Even as Kirk watched the shuttlecraft's door opened and the erring and tardy Mitchell appeared. His posture showed clearly his surprise and shock at finding the Columbus surrounded by water. But something also clearly had his attention; instead of disappearing back into the dry interior of the shuttle as Kirk had expected, Mitchell jumped down and waded round to the seaward side of the craft.

Kirk took a deep breath and set off again, Dehner close at his heels. Mitchell was taking a wholly unwarranted risk; Kirk had, he knew, been undeservedly lenient with him but this was too much; the navigator was about to get a well-deserved flea in his ear.

Mitchell shivered as he opened the shuttle door. Even although the door was on the leeward side and the air was warm, he did not fancy getting wet; the psychological chill struck deep. With another sigh he splashed into the water that covered the ledge. It came halfway to his knees and seeped coldly through the zip fastenings of his boots. The rain might be warm - the sea itself was cold, and so was the spray thrown across the ledge by the breaking waves.

He headed round the back of the Columbus, already soaked before he had gone halfway. He could still hear the scratching, though faintly now, partly muffled by the sound of wind, rain and sea. He reached the seaward side of the Columbus and gasped.

Uninhabited?

Perhaps the islands were - but the sea most definitely held living creatures.

It looked like an amalgam of things straight out of nightmare. A great flabby mass of protoplasm throbbed at the edge of the ledge, four great eyes staring unblinkingly. Tentacles groped across the ledge, tentacles that terminated in small claws. One of them scraped along the side of the shuttlecraft, claw snapping, seeking a hold. Two others near Mitchell found a hold; the tentacles retracted, pulling the thing further up onto the ledge. Mitchell shuddered and tried to retreat - too late. A snapping, almost blindly-searching claw gripped his hand. He tried to pull away; instantly more claws caught at him, dragging him forward, closer to the obscene, shapeless mass. He screamed, certain that this was death -

- and was answered.

Kirk had covered half the distance to the Columbus when he saw the thing that pulsed rhythmically beside the shuttle. At first sight it looked like a cross between an octopus and a squid, with a distant relationship to the boran thrown in. Then he realised that its tentacles were something more complicated than any of those creatures possessed.

A pelagic species, his mind registered, just beginning to come inshore with the tide. But why? The first creatures to come ashore should be the small ones, the ones that were prey to larger carnivores. This bloated monstrosity was surely not regular prey for anything.

Kirk could not see clearly what was happening, but Mitchell's scream sounded clearly above the background concerto of rain, wind and sea. Not the hunted - the hunter!

The Enterprise's First Officer acted instantly. Letting the heavy bag of rocks slip from his shoulder, he ran, slipping and stumbling on the tangle of seaweeds, the girl close behind him but falling back. The other members of the landing party, also hearing the scream, headed back as quickly as possible, but all were further away.

Kirk splashed round the Columbus to see Mitchell partly between it and the creature, being dragged inexorably seawards by a dozen claw-tipped tentacles, tentacles that retracted rather as a coelenterate's would do rather than pulling back as a crab's jointed limb would. Mitchell was straining back with all his strength, but it was having little effect against the instinctive and fantastically powerful drag of the mindless creature sprawling there. Mindless? Perhaps not. Its victim could not use his hands to try to pull the claws from him, for it had a firm grip on both arms, as if it realised that these were its prospective prey's manipulative appendages.

Kirk pulled out his phaser. His first instinct - to shoot the creature - he suppressed; it was, after all, reacting according to its nature, and Gary could probably be rescued easily enough by severing the tentacles grasping him. The loss of some of its tentacles probably wouldn't incapacitate the beast too much, and indeed it might even be able to regenerate them; it seemed a low enough life form to have that ability.

The phaser beam shot out; the creature uttered a scream of agony that made the Human shiver. Mitchell staggered back as the creature, releasing the grip of the last two or three tentacles that the phaser beam had missed, recoiled and disappeared into the deeper water.

Dehner rushed straight to Mitchell. "Gary!"

Even the wish to impress her could not overcome Mitchell's shock. He was trembling violently, and Kirk decided to postpone the reprimand that was due; it was clearly not the moment for it - Mitchell was in no state to take it, even to hear it. Kirk moved forward to help Dehner support Mitchell back into the Columbus as the first of the other men reached them.

Kirk left Davis and Oks to help Dehner with Mitchell, set Spalding to picking up the severed pieces of tentacle and Bilston to checking quickly to see if he could find any small creatures in the shallow water that might normally serve the octopus-creature as prey, and retraced his own steps to retrieve his bag of rock samples.

He was only a few minutes away. He returned to see the octopus beast - or another of the species - beginning to heave itself onto the ledge.

Kirk yelled a warning to the two men splashing in the deepening water; they glanced up and headed for the safety of the shuttle. Both men were carrying filled sample bags, Kirk noticed.

He carefully kept the shuttle between himself and the emerging monster as he waded through the knee-deep water. Inside the shuttle he dropped the bag of stones, deposited the light and unnoticed bag of plant samples beside it, and moved to the pilot's seat. While it might have been good therapy for Mitchell to pilot the shuttle in a straightforward trip back to the Enterprise, the man was clearly in no state to cope with the onerous trip back through this atmosphere, and Kirk was the only other man in the group even remotely qualified to take the shuttle off the ground. He sighed inwardly; he had hoped to be able to do at

least some of the preliminary work of his group on the way back to the Enterprise; now it would all have to be done when they got back. He had so hoped that tonight at least he could manage half an hour to relax over the beginning of a game of chess with Spock, or just to sit quietly talking, perhaps listening as the Vulcan played his harp. Now it seemed that it would have to be postponed. However, this was the last system they had to check; they could afford to take some of their off-duty time once they were headed back towards Starbase 8.

Something scraped against the hull, and Mitchell whimpered in terror. Kirk grunted to himself, finishing the pre-takeoff check.

The Columbus lifted relatively easily, swaying unsteadily as the wind caught her then steadying as Kirk compensated. At least, Kirk thought, all I have to do is get the Columbus out of the atmosphere as quickly as possible. Once above the turbulence it would be simple to return to the Enterprise.

McCoy was waiting when the Columbus docked, alerted by the routine call Kirk made as soon as they regained communications contact. He hustled Mitchell off and Kirk glanced at the others.

"I'll see you in the lab in half an hour," he said. "Mr. Davis, take my sample bags with you, please - I must report to the Captain."

"Yes, sir."

He watched them go, noting that the Herschel had already returned, then headed for his quarters to change; his clothes were feeling very uncomfortable and he knew that despite the warmth of the ship it was inadvisable to delay getting on dry ones.

He paused long enough to call the Herschel's crew to the lab in half an hour, then stripped off his damp clothes. He was half changed when the buzzer sounded, and he fastened his trousers as he called "Come."

It was Spock, as Kirk had half expected. "What happened, Jim?"

His First Officer explained concisely. Spock frowned. "You think Mitchell was careless?"

"Initially, yes, in not lifting off as soon as the water began to cover the ledge; he didn't know how fast the tide might come in. I don't fault him for investigating once he became aware of the creature even though he's not a scientist, but he'd have done better to have waited until he had someone to back him - that way he'd have run less risk and we'd have a better tricorder report on the creature."

"You think he tried to cover his original carelessness with a show of conscientiousness?"

"I think it...possible. I've overlooked a lot of near inefficiency from him - like I told you once, he's brought laziness to a fine art - and if I'd said anything it would have been like pulling him up for the sake of pulling him up; but this time I'll have to speak to him."

Spock nodded. "The fright he got might sharpen him up."

"I would doubt it," Kirk said gloomily. He was interrupted by the intercom. "Kirk here."

"Lt. Moreau reporting back, sir."

"The lab in twenty minutes, Lieutenant." Kirk was only too well aware of his subordinate's feelings for him, and had decided that for her own sake it was best to maintain a wholly formal relationship. It was hard enough for the poor girl, he realised, knowing him to be bonded to a Vulcan, without his making it more difficult for her. Perhaps fortunately, she was an excellent scientist who did not allow her unrequited affection for her senior to affect her work; Kirk had

already recommended her for a promotion she fully deserved and would undoubtedly soon be given; that this would also necessitate her transfer to another ship could only be of benefit to them both. Lt. Carstairs was shaping up well to replace her, and psychologically Kirk knew he would be happier with a male senior assistant.

Neither Moreau's group nor Carstairs' had seen the octopus creatures, but both had managed to find a landing site further from the tideline than Kirk's. On all three islands rock and vegetation were the same; only Kirk's party had seen any sign of living creatures.

Bilston had not found anything that might serve as prey for the 'octopus', but Davis and Oks had. At several places along the shoreline they had come across fish vaguely resembling mud skippers; lobefinned fish that were pulling themselves out of the water slowly, laboriously...but definitely pulling themselves out onto the moist land of the splash zone and clearly breathing air, if only to supplement the small amount of oxygen they could possibly obtain through gills barely dampened by the rain and the spray. The animal kingdom was beginning to invade the land. And although the small vertebrates were being pursued, the octopus creatures were clearly unable to go onto dry land even although they could tolerate being partly out of the water. Neither man had seen any other life form. But it was a beginning.

Roderiguez, left on the Enterprise, had spent his day on a general scan of the entire system. His findings agreed with those of the landing parties; this was a young system, the volcanic land masses barely a million years old, still many billions of years from advanced plant life or warmblooded animal life. An interesting scientific study of an early period in the evolution of land-dwelling species - and possible the struggle to survive in the sea - but that was all; there was nothing, not even mineral deposits, that would give the place any value to the Federation.

They were forty-eight hours on their route back to Starbase 8 when Mitchell returned to duty.

His Captain and First Officer were quietly disapproving when they interviewed him. Spock - rather to Mitchell's surprise - left the talking to Kirk; the First Officer began by saying quietly,

"Mr. Mitchell - what were the last orders I gave you when I left the Columbus?"

"You told me to lift off if there was trouble, sir."

"And you didn't think an incoming tide qualified as 'trouble'?"

Mitchell flushed. "I didn't realise it was coming in so quickly, sir."

"Didn't you realise the creature might be dangerous either, Mr. Mitchell?"

"No, sir. It was just sitting there, and it looked too far away..." Mitchell grapsed for the straw he had realised might just cover up for him. "I thought...if I could observe its behaviour...it might be useful..." His voice trailed off as he realised that Kirk was not impressed.

"Mr. Mitchell, for as long as I have known you, you have done the exact minimum required of you. To put it bluntly, you were a lazy slob at the Academy and you're still a lazy slob; the only difference between now and the Academy is that now you've learned what the minimum is - oh, don't try that injured expression - it won't work. Not with me, nor the Captain, nor indeed any member of the bridge crew. Every one of them has seen what you are, Mr. Mitchell.

Whatever your reason for your decision to check on the creature, you did not do so because you thought it might be useful - to us, at least. To yourself, perhaps."

The quiet accusation hit home, yet it hurt; for Mitchell had indeed - for once - acted from a sense of duty. An even greater shock was the realisation that Kirk knew - had always known - his weakness. When had the shy, anxious-to-please little introvert learned to read men like that?

"I will not embarrass you by demanding your real reason for behaving so irresponsibly," the quiet voice went on. "This time. If it happens again, I will throw the book at you. This is absolutely your last chance, Mr. Mitchell. You have always wanted success without effort. That is an impossible dream - to succeed you must work - and work hard. And Mr. Mitchell - either you start working now, to the limit of your not inconsiderable ability, or I recommend you for transfer to a Starbase."

Mitchell swallowed. A navigator recommended for Starbase duty - save on medical grounds - was as well to resign on the spot, for it was a clear accusation of incompetence. He had been recommended for transfer several times, but no-one had yet been so brutally frank.

"Dismissed."

Stunned, Mitchell left. As the door closed behind him Kirk looked at his Captain. "Was I too hard on him, Spock?"

"No. He risked not only his own lift but...that of every member of the landing party. He has been slacking since he joined the Enterprise and it has thrown extra work onto the others. They knew how difficult it was to catch him out, but they also knew that we were watching him. They knew you were giving him 'enough rope to hang himself' even if you didn't, Jim. This time he took it. It was the right time to pull him up, hard."

Kirk sighed. "I know he was just using me, but it's hard to forget that at the Academy he was my only friend..."

"Were you friends?" Spock asked. "He was using you - did he ever really care for you as a person?"

"I don't know... No, I don't suppose he did."

"He offered you an illusion, Jim. You've outgrown the need for illusions."

"Yes, but... Spock, I must have made it pretty clear to him when he came on board that although I was pleased to see him, I had very little time for him - that I didn't want to renew our friendship. Perhaps if I'd been more generous he'd have shaped up better."

"I think you made the correct decision. I suspect that he would have tried to 'play us up' much more if he had thought you completely blinded by your friendship and gratitude. And then you would have felt even more guilt at having to reprimand him now."

Mitchell, it seemed, took the warning to heart. His efficiency and speed increased considerably, and if he was at all resentful, he hid it well.

Kirk was not wholly convinced. If a leopard could not change its spots, then neither could a basically lazy man change his nature. Kirk thought it more than possible that Mitchell would, if given the opportunity, slip back into his old ways. So he let Mitchell know that he was alert for any slip.

They remained at Starbase 8 for a bare twenty-four hours, leaving to follow up a report of a culture of sorts on Dimoris - a planet known to have no humanoid natives.

As soon as it was feasible to leave the bridge, Captain and First Officer did so, leaving Chekov to 'mind the store'.

"Did you ever visit Dimoris in your other universe, Spock?"

"No. I don't remember hearing of such a place."

"You once mentioned a place called Janus that had intelligent silicon-based life forms. Do you suppose it could be the same place, just given a different name?"

Spock considered. "No," he said, glad that Kirk's psychology could now accept a direct negative to an opinion. "No-one even suspected the presence of any sort of culture on Janus, it was so completely alien in concept."

Kirk nodded, and Spock went on. "In fact, I can't think of any possible guide from the other universe." He was silent for a moment, then added wryly, "Strange. So much that I did and saw, so many missions accomplished both as First Officer and Captain, so many reports that came to me as Commodore...yet none of it has been of direct guidance to me here. Not once have I been able to say, 'In the other universe, in this situation we did...'. Everything has been parallel; similar but never quite the same."

"So we'll just have to wait and see."

"It would appear so. I could wish that the information given to us was more detailed. Indistinct readings on a scoutship's sensors are so little to go on..."

Dimoris was a beautiful planet, geologically of the same era as many of the Federation worlds - which made it rather surprising that there was not, in fact, a flourishing technology on it. Volcanically relatively stable, it had only three apparent 'lines of fire' where tectonic plates met or pulled apart; although Kirk was quite sure that given a longer survey they would discover several regions that were earthquake-prone, thus indicating smaller plates.

At their first beamdown point, plants were varied and complex; woody structures that could only be called trees, soft-stemmed herbs, some areas a mass of colour where the huge flowers hid the leaves. Some insects buzzed and droned busily from flower to flower; less industrious - but more colourful - butterfly-like shapes sampled the nectar and moved irresolutely on. A bush rattled threateningly as its pods burst explosively, scattering its seeds with considerable violence.

Above, furry pterosaurs floated in gliding flight, completely filling the avian ecological niche. A long-necked, long-legged creature moved into sight, surprisingly agile for its size; its almost ludicrously small head turned busily before it selected a tree from which to graze. A mouse-sized creature scurried past, too intent on its own affairs to notice the strangers, and disappeared under a rock.

Kirk checked his tricorder. There were numerous life-form readings, warm-blooded but not mammalian or avian. Something else - not reptilian either, but more advanced, and he remembered the theory - still hotly debated after more than two centuries - that Earth's dinosaurs were warmblooded and should belong in a classification of their own. Geologically it seemed quite possible that Dimoris should still be flourishing in a Cretaceous - or even Jurassic - era. A few million years is nothing in the lifespan of a planet.

All life readings showed equally non-sentient; Kirk gave the order to scatter and investigate the place.

"Remember," he added, "that according to fossil evidence on all known paleontologically investigated planets, the fauna of this apparent era included a number of particularly nasty carnivores - like the Terran Tyrannosaurus or the Vulcan do-matya. This planet cannot be an exception. Be careful." He watched his landing party fragment, going off in ones and twos, scientists' attention fixed on their tricorders, Security to find commanding viewpoints. Responsibility for these specialists rested firmly on the red-clad shoulders of Security, and their Chief was taking no chances. Carnivorous animals were a possibly greater danger than hostile sentients, for they at least might be reasoned with. On the other hand, there was no reasoning with a set of instinct-controlled six-inch

fangs impelled by hunger. Then Kirk turned to the so-far-silent Vulcan who had accompanied the landing party.

"A possible culture," he repeated wryly. "Looks like it, doesn't it?" His gesture took in the entire peaceful scene.

Spock smiled faintly. "There is certainly no indication of any culture," he agreed. "Not even the loose tribal association of individuals learning to co-operate...and yet a culture could exist yet still be very difficult to find. I would estimate that an intelligent race visiting Earth when Man was just evolving would have had extreme difficulty in finding any early men when their existence was still confined to small areas, even had sensor readings given any indication of their presence, for they were nomadic hunters with no permanent settlements..."

"Well, we can forget about those creatures." Kirk indicated the long-legged agile grazer. "His nervous system is nowhere near advanced enough. I wish we'd been told what those 'indistinct readings' were," he added.

"Oh, that would never do!" Spock's voice was tinged with wry humour. "We might allow ourselves to imagine things, see things that didn't exist, read into natural phenomena what we wanted to see, and so give an erroneous report."

Kirk grinned slightly. "What do they think they train us for?" he asked. "And why do the brainless ones always end up with most authority?"

"Mainly because the most able stay in active service...and keep the system functioning," Spock replied.

"Cynical, Spock? You?"

Spock was silent for a moment. Then he said, very quietly, "In the other universe I was a Commodore. But it had been made very clear to me that I would be promoted no further. I was too valuable where I was - keeping the system functioning. Had I been truly ambitious it might have troubled me; as it was, where I was was sufficient for my needs." His eyes were fixed steadily on Kirk's face and the Human felt again the awe that memory of his friend's search always brought, the sense of unworthiness that he had learned not to voice, knowing that to Spock he had become an anchor, a haven from all the years of loneliness. And following it, the now accustomed touch of pity as memory automatically led on to the Captain. Could he, if he had been stronger, have saved the Captain? He would never know. Perhaps, after all, death had been the kindest, the only release for the tormented hybrid.

Human and Vulcan remained looking steadily at each other for some moments, silently reaffirming the bond of their friendship; then Spock said softly, "Come, Jim - we have work to do."

This first landing site provided nothing but evidence of evolution still completely pre-sapient. Several of the creatures they saw showed evidence of intelligence, some of them clearly following learned patterns of behaviour rather than instinctive ones - but it was not the intelligence that allowed even the beginnings of abstract thought.

Discussing their findings, Kirk and his senior staff decided to move on, and investigate a different part of the planet, a different type of terrain. Kirk selected a more open, less densely vegetated region. On his announcing his choice of a landing site, Charlene Masters immediately requested permission to overhaul the transporter.

"Kyle wasn't happy with the transporter's performance last beam-up," she stated. "He's checked, but there's nothing obviously wrong - it'll need a more detailed check, but that means it'll be out of action for twenty-four hours. However, that region is open enough for you to use the shuttlecraft."

"Agreed," Spock confirmed. He had long since learned that Humans' 'feelings' about things were often correct - he had rationalised it as a subconscious assessing of several clues any one of which was too small to be immediately obvious - and he was in any case too good a commander not to take his subordinates' advice on technical matters which were their specialty. He turned to his Science Officer. "Mr. Kirk, how many men will you require?"

"Same as last time, sir," Kirk answered promptly. "Eight scientists and half a dozen Security guards."

"Two shuttlecraft, then, Miss Masters - Mr. Kirk will tell you what equipment he requires."

The shuttlecraft were piloted by Rahada and Mitchell. The man sighed heavily when he got the order, for he had hoped for a few quiet days while Captain and First Officer were occupied elsewhere, envying the bottom-of-the-rota Stiles, and Chokov, whose status as senior navigator saved him from these extra duties; but also aware that he was not being 'picked on' - his position on the duty roster had condemned him to this, nothing more. Kirk - Mitchell was obliged to admit to himself - had not been petty; having warned him, he had apparently left it at that, although Mitchell knew well enough that he was being watched. There had been no underhand punishment in the way of extra duties, merely his normal work and those extras that fell to his lot through the navigator's rota.

On the surface the scientists split up into pairs. Kirk took Dehner, as usual; Spock - why, Mitchell wondered, had he come, for he wasn't a scientist - accompanied Moreau; McCoy, doubling as he sometimes did as biologist, went with Bilston and Carstairs took the still relatively inexperienced Spalding. Each pair was accompanied by two Security guards - Mitchell and Rahada, on this occasion, doubled as guards since no large life forms had been detected in this area of relatively sparse vegetation. Somewhat to his disgust, Mitchell found himself, with Lt. Farrel, assigned to the First Officer. That Elizabeth Dehner was also part of the group was no comfort; she had cooled towards him recently. It stung his pride; he was undecided whether to drop her completely or try to do something to impress her. Memory of how drastic a failure his last attempt had been - he still had nightmares when he woke, screaming, trying to escape from the obscene sea-horror - did not encourage him to try again. In his own way he did love her - but trying to win her was almost too much effort.

He trailed along behind the two scientists, unwillingly alert - Spock was known to be very watchful of his First Officer's safety, and memory of the octopus beast was very clear...and that had been on a planet supposedly without animal life. This one had animal life; they had already seen several small scurrying creatures, and at least one medium-sized grazer - possibly two, but Mitchell hadn't cared to investigate the smooth grey shape that might not have been a rock too closely. Some of the furred pterosaurs glided overhead; a small one swooped, scooped up a tiny lizard-like creature and soared high again. Several yards away Farrel realised disgustedly that he would have to do at least some of Mitchell's work for him.

Blasted lazy sod! he thought. Queer - he's good company off duty, but I'd rather have anyone along than him right now. Certainly the man was a navigator, not a trained Security guard...but he'd done security work with both Stiles and Rahada in the past, and knew them for reasonably alert security-wise, so it shouldn't have made that much difference. No - Mitchell, although he had improved lately, was still too lazy to be a man anyone was particularly keen to work with.

From somewhere not too far away came a sharp cry, cut off short. Kirk whirled. "This way!"

Dehner fell behind as they ran, unable to maintain the First Officer's speed. Mitchell dropped back with her, willingly allowing Farrel to accompany his senior officer into whatever danger lay ahead, knowing that he would not be

faulted for remaining with one of the highly-trained scientific staff - even by the Captain, whose concern for the First Officer's safety was so well known. He had not, after all, abandoned Kirk unprotected - Farrel was a trained Security guard, which he was not.

Spalding lay beside a large cactus-like plant. There was a stiffness about him that made it difficult for anyone to realise that he was certainly unconscious. As Kirk's party came within sight of the tableau - Carstairs, Leslie and Garrovick kneeling beside the fourth member of their party - Leslie rose to his feet, clearly resuming his watch.

Kirk skidded to a halt beside Carstairs. "What happened?"

"Spalding was checking this plant, sir. Suddenly he yelled - he'd got a spine stuck in his finger. A moment later he'd collapsed."

"McCoy?"

"Coming." Even as Carstairs spoke the Enterprise's Chief Medical Officer ran up, followed a moment later, not only by the rest of his own group, but also by Spock's. The Captain joined his First Officer as McCoy bent over Spalding.

He gave the unconscious man an injection and glanced up. "I'll have to get him back to the ship. There's paralysis - unless I get him on full life support quickly, he'll die."

Spock scooped Spalding up. "Lt. Rahada," he said. She followed him immediately as the Captain headed back towards the shuttlecraft; McCoy was already there. Spock called back, "Carry on, Mr. Kirk."

Kirk looked round at the remaining crew members, and said quietly, "All right. Be extra careful. This may not be the only poisonous plant here. Double check everything before you touch it. Now let's see what else we can find."

There was a ragged chorus of 'Ayes' as the group scattered again.

Spock returned with Rahada within the hour to find the landing party carefully studying a patch of ground whose vegetation, even to his town-bred eyes, looked unnaturally even.

"Planted?" he asked as he joined Kirk.

"It certainly looks as if it might be," Kirk agreed. "Or rather - I'd say that some creature possessing a degree of intelligence had come on an area thickly vegetated with plants it wants, and has carefully removed any others, so that the chosen plant has no competition."

"Early cultivation."

The Human nodded. "Indicated. But there's no sign of what cultivates this crop - tricorders pick up life forms in plenty, but no sentient ones."

"A nomadic race that moved on after 'weeding'?"

Kirk frowned slightly. "It was 'weeded' pretty recently, Spock - within the last twenty-four hours, I'd say. a nomadic race wouldn't move that far in a day - ten, maybe fifteen miles at the outside if they're positively shifting their base for some seasonal reason, less if they're just drifting. The tricorder would pick up signs even at that distance." He glanced round at the others. "All right, we've studied this long enough. See what else you can find. Try not to do any damage to the 'crops' - whatever planted them depends on them."

The group scattered again. Spock hesitated for a second, tempted to remain with Kirk while Carstairs accompanied Moreau, then he joined the man. His main purpose in accompanying Moreau, after all, had been to enable him to confirm or reject Kirk's recommendation for her promotion; confirmation was already certain. Now he wanted to check Carstairs, who was Kirk's stated preference for her

replacement as senior assistant. Spock fully trusted Kirk's judgement, but the requirements of the book had to be met; he could not countersign Kirk's report without personally checking. And of course, Carstairs had just lost a man - had this been carelessness on Carstairs' part?

He was soon certain that it was not. The man was young, but he was very capable - more so than Moreau, excellent though she was. In some ways - though Carstairs still lacked experience - he would be the more obvious choice for promotion, but Spock knew that both his inexperience and Kirk's preference for a male second made the proposed change preferable. His mind made up, Spock glanced over towards Kirk's position, but could see nothing of his friend.

Kirk's route led him along the edge of the 'cultivated' area. He studied it as he went, calling Mitchell to follow him. Dehner turned aside, and Farrel went with her.

There seemed to be more life readings in the area now, but still not the sentient ones they sought. Animal...even intelligent animal...but still not sapient. There was no sign of any living creature, however; even the small scurrying beasts had vanished.

Kirk stopped so abruptly that Mitchell almost bumped into him. Puzzled, the navigator glanced around, wondering what had attracted his officer's attention.

But it seemed that Kirk himself was not sure. "Did you see anything, Mr. Mitchell?"

"No, sir."

"I thought I saw something moving..." He turned away, gazing out over the 'crops' again.

Mitchell studied his surroundings uneasily. Some distance away he could see Farrel through the sparse cactus-like vegetation, but nothing else moved... even Dehner was hidden from sight.

Without warning, a shadow moved, forming itself into a rat-like creature about two feet in height; a creature that rose on its hind legs, front paws raising something to its mouth, its dark beady eyes fixed on Kirk.

Mitchell acted instinctively. He sprang forward, sending Kirk staggering... and then a sudden sharp pain, instantly numbed, shot through one hand. He stared in blank incomprehension at the cactus spine sticking in his hand...then blackness overwhelmed him.

Even as he regained his balance Kirk realised what was happening. More rats were rising to their feet, paws clutching short lengths of what looked like plant stalks; two were raising these to their mouths.

Blow pipes!

Kirk whipped out his phaser, already set to 'stun', and sprayed the group. Even as they fell he pulled out his communicator.

"Kirk to Spock...Spock!"

"Spock here."

"Get everyone back to the shuttlecraft, Spock - urgent! And have a medic standing by. Mitchell's been poisoned too. Taking him back now." Without waiting for more Kirk returned his communicator to his belt and hauled Mitchell over one shoulder.

The man was heavy - if anything, too heavy for Kirk's relatively lighter build.- and the First Officer was driving himself on by sheer willpower by the time he came in sight of the shuttlecraft.

When he received Kirk's call Spock had to force himself to do as Kirk asked instead of going at once to look for him. He called the other parties, alerted the ship and moved quickly back to the shuttlecraft, directing the others to board as soon as they arrived, knowing from the note in Kirk's voice that there was extreme danger here - and becoming more and more agitated as none of Kirk's group showed up. The first shuttle filled and the doors were closed. Then Dehner arrived, shadowed by the Security guard, both red-faced and breathless from their haste.

"Where is Mr. Kirk?" Spock asked as they reached him.

"He..." Dehner took two quick pants before she could continue, and Spock found himself barely suppressing an irrational urge to shake her for the delay. "He was...further on...sir. I'd stopped...to...check...some readings."

"Mr. Mitchell...went with him, sir," Farrel offered.

Jim's alone... Spock thought anxiously. His voice was satisfactorily calm, however, as he said, "Mr. Mitchell has been poisoned, presumably as Mr. Spalding was. Get aboard the shuttlecraft - when he contacted me, Mr. Kirk indicated that there was danger."

He waited, watching, his mind reaching out anxiously. For the first time since Vulcan he was conscious of a wish that they had indeed formed the bonding meld as Kirk had suggested; without the sexual union that neither of them needed it would have been incomplete, but it would at least have let him know if his friend was unhurt...

Then Kirk appeared, staggering under Mitchell's weight. Spock moved forward quickly - it would not harm Kirk's confidence to help him here, he was clearly finished.

The Human surrendered his burden willingly enough, gathering the last of his strength to take him across the final interminable hundred yards to safety.

Spalding was dead. Fast though McCoy had moved, it still was not fast enough. There had been slightly less delay with Mitchell, however, and in addition McCoy considered that he had received a smaller dose of the poison; he was on full life support, but he still lived, and McCoy was hopeful.

Spock was an interested spectator when Kirk played back the tricorder report that included the rats and their behaviour. Readings still showed no constructive intelligence - but the rats clearly could learn and were responsible for the 'cultivation' in that region. One day, perhaps... but not yet. Moreau added a short record she had made - the carcass of a young individual of the grazing species they had seen, with hunks of meat hacked from it, apparently by possibly blunt but certainly serviceable knives.

"They probably use sharp-edged stones eroded from rocks." Carstairs' hobby was the development of the tool-using ability in primitive and non-sentient species. "It was probably by accident that they learned how to use blowpipes. They certainly seem to be using the natural cactus spines, so they haven't worked out how to extract the poison."

"They don't need to," Kirk said drily. "The spines are fast enough as they are."

"Yes, sir, but it limits them. Only the rats living where the cactus grows can use it."

"It also gives them an advantage," Kirk went on. "Their fellows further afield are less adequately armed... All right, so they may not need to expand their territory - yet. But they will. As their intelligence develops, they will... Meanwhile, I would suggest we recommend that this planet be declared off limits. Whether they saw us as a threat to their crops and territory or

simply as a source of food, they are clearly hostile, and not yet far enough developed to be reasoned with."

"I agree," Spock put in. "I will so recommend."

* * * * *

Mitchell slowly recovered as they made their way back to Starbase 8. He brushed off Kirk's thanks a little shamefacedly.

"You saved my life, Jim... I always pay my debts."

It was, Kirk reflected, true; he had paid Kirk for all the exercises the younger man had done for him at the Academy by giving him friendship - not particularly close, but it had provided him with some companionship during a part of his life when he had been very alone. Was that the real reason why he had been working harder recently? To repay Kirk for his life? Well, if so, Kirk hoped Mitchell would not backslide now - for if he did they would be forced to act. It was impossible to tell what Mitchell's attitude would now be, though, for the man was still not quite fit to resume his post by the time they reached the Starbase.

Captain and First Officer had to report to Commodore Devlin on their arrival, but planned to go on afterwards to a concert being held that night.

"Joining us, Bones?" Kirk asked the CMO as they lingered over a meal prior to beaming down.

McCoy shook his head. "I think I'll give it a miss this time," he said. "I've got a bit of a headache - just tired, I guess. I must be getting old."

Kirk grinned at him, knowing the hours McCoy had put in producing the antidote to the poison that had paralysed Mitchell. "You'll never grow old, Bones," he said affectionately.

Devlin listened to their report intently and nodded his agreement to their recommendation. They discussed official business for some minutes, then Devlin reached for a sealed box that stood on his desk.

"This arrived from Earth for you just after the Enterprise left for Dimoris, Commander," he said.

Kirk took it, frowning slightly as he studied the official seal. "Thank you, sir." He set it down beside his chair, curious, but somehow reluctant to open it, until the now unofficial conversation finished, glad that the Captain had always discouraged him from joining in any of his conversations with Devlin for it left him free to wonder about the box while at the same time noting how adroitly Spock handled the conversation, his comments quietly ambiguous. Kirk had never been quite sure how far Devlin had been in the Captain's confidence; although the Vulcan had trusted nobody completely, there had been one or two people he had trusted fractionally more than the others, and he had certainly always seemed to find Devlin acceptable company. Now Spock was quietly trying to withdraw to arm's length without arousing the Commodore's suspicions.

As he and Spock left Devlin's office, Kirk carried the box carefully. Spock glanced at him. "Do you want to go straight back to the Enterprise, Jim?"

"You want to go to the concert, Spock - it can wait."

"The concert is not important, Jim. Besides, there is time for you to return to the ship, open your parcel, then rejoin me before the concert begins."

Kirk took a deep breath. "Spock, I'm scared. I'm afraid of what might be in here - after all, there's no-one left on Earth to send me anything. I...I would like you to be there...when I open it."

"Very well. We will return to the Enterprise immediately. Afterwards, we can beam down again if we want to."

Whatever was in the box was well packed. On the top was a tape; Kirk lifted it out and put it on the desk while he checked the other contents.

The first thing he found, carefully wrapped in tissue paper, was a gold locket. He opened it, knowing what he would see.

His own face smiled up at him...and Sam's. As they had been so many years ago - eight years old and fourteen, happy and secure. He swallowed the lump in his throat that threatened to choke him, put down the locket and searched further.

Rings - two plain gold bands, a diamond and sapphire engagement ring, an eternity ring...a pair of sapphire ear-rings...two watches...a wallet, stained and mildewed, its stitching rotting; a handful of assorted coins.

Kirk looked at the little pile with blurred eyesight. Spock put a comforting arm round his shoulder, and he leaned gratefully against his friend. "They were dead," he managed.

"Perhaps the tape will give some details," Spock suggested.

"Yes... Play it for me."

Spock reached over and slipped the tape into the viewer. The head and shoulders of an obviously highly-ranked police official appeared.

"Commander Kirk - it is my unhappy duty to advise you that the bodies of your parents, George and Alice Kirk, were found several days ago by a party of hikers.

The indications are that their car had gone out of control on a bad bend, left the road which at that time was not fenced, and plunged some distance down the mountainside before it came to rest. Both of the occupants were still inside the car when it was found, and the police surgeon believes that they were killed instantly; there was no indication that either had tried to release the seat belts or get out, and every indication that their necks were broken, possibly by whiplash during the fall. The wreck has remained undiscovered for so long because of the nature of the terrain.

I enclose the valuables found on the bodies."

Spock reached over and switched the viewer off. "At least you know now," he said gently.

The Human sighed. "I can hardly remember them," he said quietly. "I just remember how terrible it was when they didn't come home... It's nice to know that they didn't desert us after all - I think Sam always half believed that they did. I find myself thinking of Sarek and T'Pol as my parents - not just my adopted parents...just as I think of you, rather than Sam, as my brother."

"They are your parents, Jim - in Vulcan law an adopted son has exactly the same rights as a natural child."

"I know, but even before that they made me feel..." Kirk broke off. He looked at the items in front of him again, then sat up to put them carefully back in the box. "They were killed," he said again. "I can't bury their memory now. It's strange," he added reflectively, "since you came, all my ghosts have been laid."

"You would have heard this news anyway," Spock pointed out. "And Sam and Mitchell would still have come on board..."

"But with the Captain here, things would have been different," Kirk answered. "Sam might have seemed like a lifeline - but it would have been a rotten one. Mitchell... If Mitchell had found out about me, he would have thought I submitted because I was weak-willed and dependent on someone else, someone

stronger - he would have believed it was the price I was prepared to pay for protection. And this..." He indicated the box. "He would have found some way to mock."

Spock laid a gentle hand on his friend's shoulder again, gripping it comfortably. "He is gone," he said quietly.

"I know...but sometimes I find myself wondering... If he was still alive and recovered...and worked out how your transporter operated...and came back, looking for me... He was dead, Spock, wasn't he?"

"Yes, Jim - he was dead." Realising that his friend needed some cheerful distraction at this time, he went on, "Do you still wish to attend the concert, Jim? We are in time."

Kirk nodded. "Yes, I'd like to," he said absently. He made no move for a moment, though, but leaned his head against Spock's hand. "What would I do without you?" he whispered; then as Spock sought for an answer he looked up and smiled. "Sorry - I was just being morbid." He stood up and headed for the door. "Shall we go?"

As they entered the transporter room he added thoughtfully, "I hope Bones is all right. It's a pity he didn't feel well enough to come with us - he could do with a break."

"I agree."

Taking their places on the transporter platform the two men nodded cheerfully to Kyle as they shimmered from sight.

* * * * *

SPOCK'S LOG

I am somewhat concerned about Jim; why should he suddenly doubt, after all this time, that the Captain is dead? For I know that he is.

Jim has accepted the news about his parents calmly, but I am convinced that he must be experiencing considerable relief from the certain knowledge that they did not, after all, desert him.

Work is probably the best therapy now, and I hope will keep him from fretting about the Captain.

* * * * *

KIRK'S LOG

So now I know what happened to my parents. Strange how important knowing would once have been, how unimportant it actually is now. Perhaps Spock's certainty convinced me without my realising it.

Now all my personal problems have been solved...and yet...

Despite Spock's conviction that he is dead, I have a premonition that we have not seen the last of the Captain. Strange that this doubt did not bother me until recently; now it is growing stronger daily. I do not want to trouble Spock with it - after all, even if the Captain did somehow survive, and did learn how Spock's apparatus worked, the chances of his finding this universe again are vanishingly small - from what Spock says, there are very many different universes. And against the possibility, faint though it is, I now have the mental disciplines Spock taught me. I know that no-one can take over my mind again, not even the Captain.

No. He is dead. The tape about my parents has made my thoughts morbid.

They are all dead. My parents, my brother, the Captain; all the people

who betrayed - or who I thought betrayed - my trust. I have foster parents now, and a chosen brother who is also my Captain, and who I know will never fail me.

It is a comforting thought.

* * * * *

AFTERWORD

Spock entered his cabin thankfully, even his endurance taxed by the long and tedious day now past. He had dismissed an exhausted Kirk some hours ago, telling him to rest, but was only now free to seek his own bed.

A small package on the desk caught his eye and he examined it curiously, puzzled to see his own name in Kirk's writing; why should the Human leave a tape for him, when their cabins were only yards apart?

Intrigued, he slipped the tape into the player and switched on; Kirk's soft voice, slightly husky with tiredness, came from the speaker.

Love without desire. It gives me
Peace, security...and happiness.

Our minds touched briefly when they thought we bonded
Reassuring me - oh, my friend,
As if I needed reassurance! Not with you.
You've given me so much, my friend,
Asking for nothing in return, content
That I am happy, wanting me to be
Self-sufficient; giving and giving...
In insecurity I took those gifts,
Needing them; but now
I have a gift for you; for now
I say with pride - Spock, Captain, friend,
I love you.

And the flames of the Guardian burned brightly through a veil of tears.
